Chapter draft: Christopher Germer (2022). *Self-compassion: An antidote to shame*

Part I: The Basics

CHAPTER 1

What's Self-Compassion?

If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.

- Jack Kornfield

Self-compassion is a humble enterprise—it's simply including ourselves in the circle of our compassion. Recall for a moment the last time your felt compassion for someone. Perhaps it was someone struggling with an illness or a homeless person on the street? How did you feel? What went through your mind? After you recognized that the person was suffering, you were probably moved by the person's experience and had the wish to help in some way. It's the same with self-compassion. When we're being self-compassionate, we know we're suffering, we feel connected to others in our struggles, and we respond with kindness and understanding.

Everyone feels compassion toward someone or something, especially toward innocent beings like children or pets. Compassion is harder to come by when we don't like someone, or when the person feels "other"—those who look, think or act differently than we do. However, the most difficult person to feel compassion toward is ourselves. Research shows that most of us are more compassionate toward others than ourselves. Therefore, learning self-compassion is a radical act. It may also be the best thing you can do for yourself.

This chapter provides an overview of self-compassion, focusing specifically on the relationship of self-compassion to shame. Personal exercises are provided to give you a direct

experience of the main concepts. If you would like to dive more deeply into self-compassion *before* addressing shame, please consider taking an MSC course or looking through the MSC workbook.

Myths about Self-Compassion

In 2003, when Kristin Neff defined self-compassion and published the Self-Compassion Scale, there were only two articles research literature on this topic—hers. Now there are thousands of published studies on self-compassion and we know a whole lot more about the subject.

Some common myths about self-compassion are that self-compassion is related to *selfishness, weakness, self-pity, self-indulgence,* or *lack of motivation.* However, the research shows the opposite. People who are self-compassionate are not selfish. They actually tend to be more compassionate toward others and caring and supportive in their intimate relationships. Psychological tests have found no correlation between self-compassion and narcissism. Self-compassionate people are also not weak; research consistently shows that self-compassionate people are *more* emotionally resilient in the face of hardship and stress. Self-compassion helps people cope with divorce, chronic illness, early childhood trauma, and chronic pain. War veterans, for example, are much less likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder when they are self-compassionate.

Regarding self-pity, self-compassionate people tend to focus *less* on their own problems—they ruminate less and they're more able to keep their problems in perspective. Rather than being self-indulgent, self-compassionate people tend to balance short-term pleasure (eating the rest of that chocolate cake) with long-term benefit (health and wellbeing). They also drink less, exercise more, and are more likely to go to the doctor when they need to. Contrary to common belief, self-compassion is also good for motivation. People who are self-compassionate

tend to have the same high standards as people who are less self-compassionate, but they are more motivated to achieve their goals because they motivate themselves with kindness and encouragement rather than criticism. Self-compassionate people are also less afraid of failure and more capable of admitting their mistakes and correcting them. Other research shows that self-compassion increases happiness and life satisfaction, lowers stress, anxiety and depression, enhances the immune system, and most importantly for the topic of this book, it decreases shame.

The research question that introduced Kristin to self-compassion is how we gain self-esteem. Our self-esteem can come from inside or outside us. When our self-esteem depends on the approval of others, it goes up and down depending the situation we're in. However, when self-worth comes from inside—from the love and kindness we give ourselves when things go wrong—we carry it with us everywhere we go. This kind of self-esteem is much more stable than that based on external approval. Research shows that self-compassion enhances our overall self-confidence and self-esteem.

Many of the benefits of self-compassion can be explained by a reduction in shame. For example, if we do not have shame to contend with, we can recover more quickly from failure. Shame makes us focus on ourselves and obsess about our failures, but when we have less shame, we can see our problems more clearly and respond more effectively. However, reducing shame and enhancing self-compassion are not the same thing. Self-compassion is suffused with positive qualities such as warmth and kindness, a sense of connection, and openness and curiosity about life. When we experience a failure, we certainly don't want to get mired in shame, but we also need energy and enthusiasm to move forward. That's where the positive

qualities of self-compassion come in. As Sigmund Freud remarked, "How bold one gets when one is sure of being loved."

Personal Obstacles to Self-Compassion

In addition to the myths about self-compassion given above, there are many personal concerns that people have about self-compassion. For example:

- "I'm afraid to let down my guard and feel vulnerable."
- "Self-criticism has gotten me where I am today. I don't want to give that up."
- "The thought of being kind to myself makes me sad."
- "Men don't do this sort of thing."
- "I'm just not good enough. I don't deserve it."
- "I've been told I'm "less than" due to my personal identity."
- "I had a lot of trauma and don't want to look inside."
- "It makes me anxious, like bad things could happen."
- "I can't afford to slow down and lose my edge."
- "I need to be perfect. I need to hide my flaws."

These concerns may be understood as *fears* of self-compassion. Self-compassion is a natural resource that nourishes all aspects of our lives, but when we fear it, we can't let it in and enjoy the benefits. Therefore, it's helpful to discover our fears of self-compassion, analyze them more closely, and then to decide if self-compassion is a good idea.

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Try This: What Gets in the Way of Me Being More Self-Compassionate?

This exercise will help you identify personal obstacles to self-compassion. Some fears are obvious and others are hiding beneath the surface. By repeatedly asking yourself the question,

"What gets in the way of me being more self-compassionate?", you can uncover your deepest fears. You can do this exercise by yourself or you can invite someone whom you trust to ask you the questions. Please take all the time you need and see what emerges for you.

1. "What gets in the way of me being more self-compassionate?"

   _____

2. "And *what else* gets in the way of me being more self-compassionate?"

   _____

3. "And *what else* gets in the way of me being more self-compassionate?"

   _____

4. "And *what else* gets in the way of me being more self-compassionate?"

   _____

When you're done, please take a few gentle breaths and let the experience settle. You may have let yourself be vulnerable and touched some tender spots. For now, you don't need to change a thing. Allow your fears to be there, part of the tapestry of your life. Your fears have been keeping you safe and they will slip away when they are no longer needed. They may also pop up again as you progress on the path to self-compassion. For now, just congratulate yourself—you have just taken a first step on the path of self-compassion for shame.

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How Would I Treat a Friend?

A handy definition of self-compassion is: "When we suffer, treating ourselves with the same kindness and understanding as we would treat a good friend." For most of us, however, this is a lofty intention rather than a reality. There is usually a difference between how we treat ourselves

and how we treat others when things go wrong. To explore this matter for yourself, please take a moment and consider the following:

- Imagine you have a friend who is suffering, who has failed, or feels inadequate in some way. You have some time to spend with your friend. What is your attitude toward that person (patient or impatient)? What words would you use? What might be the tone of your voice (tender or harsh)? Would you try to comfort or support your friend in some way? If so, how?
- Now please bring to mind a time when *you* were in a similar predicament—perhaps you failed at something, were feeling inadequate, or were struggling. As you reflect on that event, can you can recall what went through your own mind? (Did you think "I'm a loser" or "No big deal…everyone makes mistakes"?) What was the tone of your inner voice? Your overall attitude? Did you do anything to comfort or support yourself when you were feeling like this?
- Finally, please compare your reactions to these situations. Were they the same? Different? If they were different, *how* were they different?

When you thought of a friend, there is a good chance that your overall attitude was kinder and more understanding, and that you were more likely to comfort and soothe that person. Perhaps your choice of words, and tone of your words, was softer and more sympathetic toward the other person. If so, you're in good company. Sixty-eight percent of us are more compassionate toward others than ourselves, 6% are more compassionate toward themselves, and 16% are equally compassionate toward themselves and others.

If you noticed that you were actually *tougher* on others than yourself, you may have been thinking about someone very close to you, such as a child, partner, or parent. This is because we

need a little space between ourselves and others for compassion to arise. For example, if your child was upset because he failed a test at school, and it felt like *you* failed the test and it reflected badly on you, you are more likely to have reacted in a harsh manner. However, if you could step back and see how your child was struggling with the experience of failure and that he really didn't want that to happen again, then compassion is more likely to have arisen within you.

Since it can be hard to feel compassion for people close to us when they suffer, just imagine how hard it is to feel compassion for yourself when *you* suffer. Distance is hard to come by when the person suffering and the person observing the suffering are both within our own skin. Nonetheless, perspective is still possible. That's where mindfulness comes in. We can intentionally step back and say, "This happened to me" or "I'm feeling upset right now." Naming or labeling our emotions puts a little space between ourselves and our experience—space for self-compassion to arise.

By far, the trickiest emotion to get perspective on is shame. Shame is an attack on the self, and when we're under attack, we go into survival mode— fight, flight or freeze. The fight-flight-freeze reaction works very quickly, and it short-circuits higher mental functions like logical reasoning and perspective-taking. This is helpful when we are experiencing an external threat, but it is counterproductive when the threat is internal—a challenge to our sense of self. When the threat is internal, we turn on ourselves. We fight with ourselves, blaming ourselves for what happened. We flee from ourselves, perhaps numbing ourselves in denial, dissociation, drinking or distraction. And we freeze; our thinking gets stuck in obsessive rumination, "Why me…why did this happen to me?" This unholy trinity of reactions makes it difficult to step back and recognize, "Oh, this is shame. I'm feeling shame!"

What does it take to begin working mindfully with shame, especially in the *midst* of shame? Self-compassion can help, and "How would I treat a friend?" is an excellent starting point. When you find yourself caught in emotional turmoil, shame or otherwise, just imagine a dear friend in the same situation feeling the same way you do. Then ask yourself, "How would I treat that person?" "What would I say?" "What would I do?" When you have an answer, see if you can do the same for yourself. Projecting how you feel onto another person will give you the perspective you need to get out of your own way and respond in a compassionate manner to yourself. When you're feeling shame, can begin to deliver the medicine for shame—self-compassion—even before you have the diagnosis.

The Three Elements of Self-Compassion

Kristin Neff's operationally defined self-compassion for her dissertation research and she built her Self-Compassion Scale around the definition. The Self-Compassion Scale has been used in almost all the research on self-compassion and has withstood intense scientific scrutiny. Her definition of self-compassion has also inspired numerous applications of self-compassion in the fields of psychotherapy, education, business and medicine.

Self-compassion has three core elements: (1) mindfulness, (2) common humanity, and (3) self-kindness. These elements overlap with each other, but they also have distinct characteristics.

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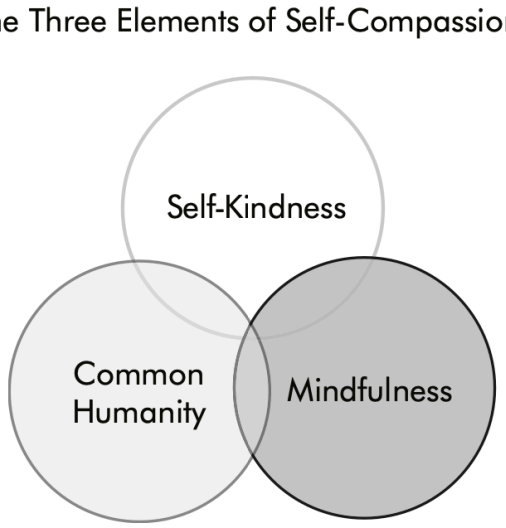

Each component of self-compassion also has an opposing quality:

- Mindfulness versus overidentification
- Common humanity versus isolation
- Self-kindness versus self-criticism.

On Kristin's scale, as one component of self-compassion goes up, the opposing quality goes down. Interestingly, the opposing qualities—overidentification, isolation and self-criticism—are also hallmarks of shame. That implies that as self-compassion increases, shame decreases. Research has confirmed the same using separate scales for self-compassion and shame. Now let's individually explore each of the three components of self-compassion:

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is awareness of what we're experiencing *while* we're experiencing it, with an attitude of acceptance.

> *Alysia was looking forward to meeting one of her best friends at a restaurant across town. They had a lot of catching up to do. However, Alysia received a text at the*

appointed time from her friend who was waiting at the restaurant. Alysia had put the wrong date in her appointment calendar. When she realized what she had done, Alysia was horrified. Her heart started racing and her mind blanked out. Then she thought to herself, "I'm such a bad person. How could I do this to my best friend?" Alysia just wanted slip into the earth and disappear. Eventually, Alysia realized, "I'm feeling shame right now," she resolutely picked up her phone, and she returned her friend's text with a sincere apology.

When Alysia received the text from her friend, she felt fear, confusion, and blamed herself for her mistake. When the shock wore off, Alysia realized what she was feeling and could even give it a name—"shame." With that awareness, Alysia snapped out of the trance of shame and she made amends with her friend. Alysia had become mindful.

Mindfulness of suffering is the first step to self-compassion. We need a moment of suffering for compassion to arise, but we also need to be *aware* that we're suffering. When we can say, "Oh, this is stressful" or "This hurts," with a non-judgmental attitude, we're probably being mindful. However, when shame initially arises, we are rarely mindful. Shame is just too painful. In Alysia's case, her fear had to subside and her thinking needed to clear before she became aware of what she was feeling. It may have taken longer if Alysia's shame were more intense. Fortunately, the more we learn about shame and how it manifests in our own lives, the more mindful of shame we will be.

Mindfulness training helps, too. Research shows that mindfulness meditation increases "interoception," or awareness of the body's inner sensations. Each emotion, including shame, has its own internal fingerprint and the more attuned we are to our bodies, the more likely we are to recognize shame as it arises. Shame is an emotion like any other and being able to sit calmly

with shame rather than getting swept up in it can save us a lot of unnecessary stress. If you would like to start a mindfulness meditation practice, a good place to start is by taking an 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Some people find it helpful to have a mindfulness practice before learning self-compassion, but others find that they need to learn self-compassion before practicing mindfulness. An example of how self-compassion can support mindfulness is the "How would I treat a friend?" exercise you may have just tried. When we start thinking about a different person in the same situation, we disentangle from what we're feeling and can be more mindful. At the end of the day, mindfulness and self-compassion are inseparable. They are best friends forever.

The opposite of mindfulness is overidentification. Overidentification means getting swallowed up in an emotion and forgetting that it's just an emotion. For example, if I feel shame and have the thought "I'm a bad person" and I believe that's the truth about who I am, then I have overidentified. However, if I can say, "Oh, I'm thinking I'm a bad person. Gosh, am I?" then I'm being mindful and not overidentified. Overidentification also refers to global evaluations of ourselves. When I'm mindful, I can say, "Well, sometimes I think that I'm a bad person, and that may even be true on occasion, but there is a lot more to me than that."

The concept of overidentification overlaps with the concepts of rumination and self-absorption, also common characteristics of shame. When we feel shame, we are likely to obsess about what just happened and what it means: "Why me? Why did this happen to me?" We become absorbed in ourselves and it's hard to see anything else. Mindfulness frees us from overidentification.

Common Humanity

Common humanity is the sense of being connected to others. The opposite of common humanity is feeling isolated and alone, which is also how most people feel when they're in the grip of shame.

> *Alysia is normally an outgoing person with a lot of friends. She was the first person among her friends to reach out to reconnect after the pandemic. Alysia also cares a lot about other people, is sensitive to their needs, and values being a good friend. When the shame of leaving her friend stranded at the restaurant set in, Alyssa felt isolated and alone, like she was the worst person in the world. The gap between her behavior and her standard of friendship was too great. After Alysia recognized she was feeling shame, she could see that she had made an innocent mistake. No one is perfect. Mistakes are part of being human.*

Shame occurs when we deviate from cultural or personal norms and standards. In this case, Alysia, broke her own rules and she felt bewildered and alone. Her reaction was not rational, but it is part of the shame experience, probably hardwired from our evolutionary need to feel connected and to belong.

Even though we may *feel* isolated and alone at times, we are never actually alone. We are connected in our common humanity. For example, all human beings suffer. We all wish to be happy and free from suffering. We wish to be loved. We share similar emotions, including shame. We are all different, but connected in being different. Nobody is perfect. Every one of us will die. Furthermore, we are interdependent—we depend on one another for even the smallest things, such as a piece of clothing or a morsel of food. As Carl Sagan said, "To make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent a universe."

In a moment of shame, however, we feel uniquely alone, like a single thread removed from the cloth. Ironically, any time we feel shame, millions of people around the world are probably feeling the same way in that very moment. Everyone knows what shame feels like—it's a universal human emotion. Shame makes us feel unworthy, inferior, incompetent, or unlovable, but these attributions are not facts. Shame only means is that we are *feeling* devalued, either by ourselves or others. Feeling shame is not a crime, and it can even lead us to common humanity.

How do we move from isolation to common humanity in the midst of shame? The process is two-fold: (1) opening to suffering and (2) remembering our common humanity. Opening to suffering is the most important part. If we try to connect with common humanity without directly experiencing my pain, then common humanity will just be an intellectual exercise. Remembering common humanity can help us feel our pain, however. For instance, it's easier to say, "I'm feeling shame…all people feel shame" rather than just "I'm feeling shame." Pain becomes more tolerable when we feel less alone.

Self-Kindness

Self-kindness refers to a caring attitude when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate. Self-kindness has the qualities of warmth, affection, friendliness, benevolence and goodwill.

> *After replying to her friend's text, Alysia felt a little better but continued to blame herself for her carelessness. When her friend texted back and said that she understood, and they rescheduled, Alysia felt reconnected and somewhat relieved. However, she still could not reconcile her error with her high standard of friendship. Alysia realized she needed to be less demanding and more forgiving of herself. For Alysia, this meant journaling about what happened and sharing her mistake with some close friends.*

Alysia could not simply think herself out of shame—she needed to feel some warmth to let go of shame. The warmth came in the kindness of her good friend and also self-compassion.

Regulating emotions with kindness is nothing new. When babies are distressed, they naturally reach out caregivers for comfort and support. A warm gaze, soothing touch, or gentle vocalizations are often all that's necessary for a child to feel safe and secure. We also internalize how we are treated in childhood, so if we consistently received a compassionate response to our distress, we are likely to do the same for ourselves as adults. However, even if self-kindness is not a habit from childhood, it can still be learned.

The opposite of self-kindness is self-criticism. Shame and self-criticism go hand-in-hand. Ironically, when we criticize ourselves, we might imagine that self-criticism is protecting us from further harm. Mostly, however, self-criticism just keeps us in a state of shame. Being kind to ourselves reduces *both* self-criticism and shame.

When people think of self-compassion, they usually think of the self-kindness aspect. Mindfulness and common humanity are less obvious. However, to be truly self-compassionate, all three components need to be engaged. We need to *know* when we're suffering (mindfulness), we need to *feel connected* with others and with ourselves (common humanity), and we need to *respond* with warmth and kindness (self-kindness).

Tender and Fierce Self-Compassion

Compassion is commonly associated with nurturing, such as the image of a mother nurturing her children. However, that is only one side of compassion. Mothers can also be fierce when they need to be, like a Momma Bear. Is it any less compassionate for a mother to scream at her child who is running into a busy street than when she calms and soothes her child who woke up from a nightmare? Is it any less compassionate for a firefighter to run into a building to save the trapped

occupants than it is to comfort and console them once they are brought to safety? Fierce action is sometimes the most compassionate thing we can do.

Self-compassion can also be fierce. How self-compassionate would it be to sit in a burning building comforting and soothing ourselves when we need to run for safety? Generally speaking, the fierce side of self-compassion is acting self-compassionately in the world—protecting, providing and motivating. The tender side is nourishing ourselves when we're alone—comforting, soothing and validating. However, sometimes we need to be fierce with ourselves when we're alone, such as when we're engaging in bad habits. Fierce does not mean self-critical. Both fierce and tender self-compassion have kindness at the root. The fierce side of self-compassion is "strong, empowered clarity" and the tender side is "loving, connected presence." We need both. Kristin recently wrote an excellent book on the topic, eponymously titled *Fierce Self-Compassion*.

A common theme underlying fierce and tender compassion is *care*. Sometimes we need to care for ourselves with tender self-compassion before we can venture out into the world, and sometimes we need to build strong, safe boundaries in the outside world before we can turn inward. Fierce self-compassion can also help us improve the larger world we live in, especially when tackling systemic problems like racism and climate change. Fierce self-compassion enables us to see our part in systemic problems with less guilt and shame, which enables us to act proactively to change it. Fierce self-compassion also builds emotional resilience among people whose identities are culturally oppressed, and it protects people from exhaustion as they do the long-term work of changing social systems.

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Try This: **The Self-Compassion Scale**

Are you wondering how self-compassionate you are? To find out, you can go to Kristin's website and take the Self-Compassion Scale: https://self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are/ Your score will be automatically calculated. I recommend you do this now, and again when you are finished reading this book. Seeing how your self-compassion score increases will encourage you to keep practicing.

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***Try This*: Compassionate U-Turn**

Research shows that there are three ways that compassion is expressed around the world. They are (1) a soft gaze, (2) soothing and supportive touch, and (3) gentle vocalizations. When you are being compassionate with someone else, you are probably doing these three things. Mercifully, we can do the same for ourselves—we can do a compassionate U-turn—and experience the same benefits. The following exercise shows you how. You can also access a guided recording of this practice at www.guilford.com.

Instructions

Please start by finding a comfortable position, sitting or lying down, and allow your eyes to close, partially or fully. Take a few long, slow breaths, allowing any unnecessary stress to release as you exhale.

- **Soft Gaze**

  Please bring to mind a person or other living being whom you consider deeply compassionate, especially the face and eyes. It could be your dog, a grandparent, a friend, a child, maybe even someone whom you saw in a photo that touched you. Visualize those eyes and let yourself bathe in that being's gaze.

- **Soothing and Supportive Touch**

  Now let's explore different kinds of touch, searching for the one that is most soothing or supportive for you. Take your time.

  - Palms gently pressed against one another
  - One hand cupped in the other
  - Two hands over your heart
  - One fist on your chest cupped by the other hand
  - One hand over the heart
  - Gently stroking your chest
  - One hand on your cheek
  - Cradling your face in your two hands
  - Crossing your arms and giving yourself a gentle hug
  - Gently stroking your crossed arms

  See if you can find the one gesture that you find most soothing or supportive and linger with that one for a while, taking it in.

- **Gentle Vocalizations**

  Now think for a moment what words you *would love to hear in your life right now,* perhaps words love, kindness, support, or trust. Be brave—no one has to know what you are thinking. (Pause). Then whisper those words into your own ear, over and over. Do it in a warm and tender way, as you might with a person whom you love very much. Allow the words to saturate your being.

- Now let's combine all these expressions of compassion. Visualize the compassionate gaze and allow yourself to receive it and enjoy it, then add your preferred soothing or

supportive touch, and then repeat to yourself the words you need to hear right now in a warm and gentle manner. Please give yourself permission to bask in compassion as long as you like.

- Finally, begin to let go of the practice and settle back into your body, feeling what's there, allowing your experience to be just as it is and allowing yourself to be just as you are.
- And when you're ready, gently opening your eyes.

What did you notice? What did you feel? Was there one expression of compassion that had a greater impact than the others? What was it like to do all three in combination? Feel free to take notes on what worked for you, and then try to remember to do something similar in your daily life. For example, if you find yourself stressed-out, perhaps even feeling a moment of shame, just put a hand over your chest and feel the gentle touch of your hand. No expectations, just feeling the touch of your hand. It might change the course of your day.

Many people feel uneasy in the early stages of self-compassion practice. They may feel undeserving, or anxiety arises, or just awkward. In Chapter 4, you will learn how to work with challenging emotions that arise during self-compassion practice. Some people feel nothing at all when they practice. That's also common. Everyone is different, and we need to be creative about how we address our individual needs. Rest assured that your intention or be more self-compassionate will eventually bear fruit. Self-compassion is an "intention" practice rather than a "good feelings" practice. Sometimes we feel good, sometimes we feel bad, and sometimes we feel nothing at all. Our intentions drive the train, and eventually our good intentions will evoke positive feelings and improve our lives.

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Points to Remember

- Most people are more compassionate toward others than themselves.
- Some common myths about self-compassion are that self-compassion is related to selfishness, weakness, self-pity, self-indulgence, or lack of motivation. Burgeoning research proves otherwise.
- We each have fears, based on our personal experience, that are obstacles to giving ourselves compassion. Examining our fears opens the door to self-compassion.
- Self-compassion has three key elements: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness. They are the opposite of overidentification, isolation, and self-criticism, which are common characteristics of shame.
- Self-compassion can be tender or fierce. Generally speaking, the fierce side is how we act in the world and the tender side is how we act when we're alone. We need both.
- Two questions that open the door to self-compassion are "How would I treat a friend"? and "What do I need?"

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