



Resiliency 2: Self-Love, Compassion and Longevity

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Purpose:

Explore what it means to practice self-love and compassion. Discover exercises for times of emotional suffering and practices for your daily life to build your self-love muscle!

“Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect” – [Kristin Neff, Ph.D.](#)

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1. Introduction

Self-love is key to a happy life and gives us energy to be in service of your others, an important element of effective changemaking. As changemaking can demand so much of our personal physical, mental and emotional energy, self-love can help us replenish ourselves, build resiliency to challenges and be sustainable in our work. If we do not have love and compassion for ourselves, we will have less love and compassion for others - we cannot fill others up if we are empty. If we keep pouring energy out when we need it ourselves, we may experience burnout. When we live lovingly and authentically with ourselves, we become a living example for the people around us. Just learning to love yourself for you, will help others in their own transformations and move us all towards a more compassionate world.

Practicing self-love is sometimes easy, sometimes difficult. Some people experience self-love more naturally than others. As we are all on our own journey, it's important to be honest with yourself and compassionate for wherever you are at. This honesty and compassion is in fact what practicing self-love is all about!

But how can we effectively practice self-love? Self-love means fully accepting every part of us with compassion, treating ourselves with respect and kindness and actively nurture our growth and wellbeing. How do you treat yourself emotionally? How do you take care of your body? When you want to congratulate or treat yourself extra kindly, what activities or practices do you turn to? Beyond how you treat yourself, self-love is also about becoming aware of how you think and feel about yourself. It's about unlearning the behaviour, thoughts and feelings that do not serve you and building patterns of self-kindness and self-compassion.

Ultimately, self-love is about accepting who you are and loving yourself unconditionally. When we practice self-love, we gain an overall positive outlook of ourselves and can celebrate every part of who we are. This doesn't mean you feel positive about yourself all the time, or that you're "failing" if you aren't positive -- that would be unrealistic. But how do you decide to treat yourself in those moments of being negative with yourself? And, how do you practice living a life with less of those thoughts, feelings and behaviours that are not rooted in love for yourself?

This guide offers you tools and practices for self-love and compassion both during daily life and when you experience emotional crisis or suffering. Self-love requires regular practice to build mental, emotional and physical habits for a long-term loving relationship with yourself. You can come back to them anytime you need them. There are many practices, readings, resources for this self-work. This resource is meant to help you wherever you are on your path.

Self-love is a cognitive or emotional muscle that needs to be built up over time; practicing self-love through activities in this guide is the equivalent of a physical workout for muscles in your body. Through mindfulness and other daily practices, we can retrain our body and brain away from habits, feelings and thoughts that are not self-loving and replace them with compassionate ones. Working towards true self-love will bring profound positive changes to your life and how you feel on a daily basis.

Sometimes when we begin reflecting on our love for ourselves, painful memories, stories and beliefs about ourselves may arise. This is normal! While everyone's emotional journey is different, many of the emotional struggles people face in our daily lives often have a connection to a past experience that taught us that emotion. If something painful comes up from the past, know that you can stop anytime if you are overwhelmed. That said, meet anything that comes up for you with compassion, and care for yourself as you would a friend or loved one, for example through offering yourself kind language and comfort.

These exercises will help you build self-love, but are not a replacement for professional care if you need it. Seeking a professional for mental health support is a great thing to do for yourself and is nothing to be embarrassed about.

These are examples of what self-love can look like (Sharon Martin, [Psych Central](#)):

- Saying positive things to yourself
- Forgiving yourself when you mess up
- Meeting your own needs
- Being assertive
- Not letting others take advantage of or abuse you
- Prioritizing your health and wellbeing
- Spending time around people who support you and build you up (and avoiding people who don't)
- Asking for help
- Letting go of grudges or anger that holds you back
- Recognizing your strengths
- Valuing your feelings
- Making healthy choices as much as possible
- Living in accordance with your values
- Pursuing your interests and goals
- Challenging yourself
- Holding yourself accountable
- Giving yourself healthy treats
- Accepting your imperfections
- Setting realistic expectations
- Noticing your progress and effort

2. Instructions

This resource is meant to be something you can come back to and choose from, But for your first time using it, here is a structure to build a week long practice to help create a consistent habit and to give yourself time to go deeper into the benefits of self-love.

For one week, start each day by setting intentions in your journal for how you will be with yourself for that day (Activity 2, Exercise 6). This is about clear, positive intentions for how you will be loving and kind with yourself that day. It may be that you will offer yourself compassionate care when you are feeling challenged or find yourself using negative self talk, or planning to spend some time doing something you enjoy. These can change daily.

At the end of each day, write down 5 or more wins, joys or accomplishments you can celebrate for yourself that day. This can include if you acted in alignment with the intentions you set in the morning. Consider how the intention setting at the beginning of the day played a role in how you showed up for yourself.

Choose and complete at least one practice below from Activity 2: *Consistent Practices for Developing Self-Love and Compassion*.

Lastly, if you experience an emotionally overwhelming moment or day, or feel stressed or anxious, try one of the exercises from Activity 1. This would be either a meditation to calm your nervous system in that moment, or a journaling exercise to process your feelings. You can do one of these any time during the week if you need. These are tools in your back pocket that you can use in difficult times. Trust that it will help and give it a try even if you have doubt.

2.1 Activity 1: In Moments of Crisis, Pain or Grief

What's happening in our bodies when we experience emotional suffering or challenges?

Feelings of stress, anxiety, sadness or other negative emotions occur when our autonomic nervous system is responding to our environment with a [stress](#)

[response](#), usually when it perceives emotional or physical danger. Stress responses are connected to our [limbic system](#) -- the emotional centre of the brain that keeps us safe by responding to danger through activating the nervous system, increasing heart rate and blood pressure and releasing neurochemicals in our bodies to give us energy to [escape \(flight\) or overcome \(fight\) danger](#). Stress does not necessarily mean the everyday meaning, such as being stressed about school or work. A stress response describes many different physiological events in the body, varying in symptoms and effects in each person.

Stress responses are normal and healthy in short periods, but are unhealthy if they last days, months, or more. The emotion centre of our brain, ([limbic system](#)) cannot distinguish between true danger in the present moment and the sense of danger that arises when we think about a source of stress from our past or perceived in our future. If you experience daily stress from thinking about past experiences or future expectations, school, a job, a relationship or otherwise, your body gets trained over time to stay in a long term stress state, because it keeps trying to protect you from 'danger.' But you can break those patterns, calm your nervous system and retrain it to remain calm, which will have immense benefits to your body and mind. This happens by learning to activate the parasympathetic nervous system which oversees relaxation and regeneration in the body. When the parasympathetic nervous system is active, our blood pressure drops, heart rate goes down, blood sugar regulates, heart rate variability goes up and immune function strengthens.

[Check out this link from Calm With Yoga](#) to learn more about how the nervous system works and how its different states impact the body's ability to heal and grow. Understanding how our body experiences stress gives us very powerful tools to change that negative experience we are having. Even if the mind says "I can't stop feeling this," we can use our physiology to our advantage to calm ourselves down to a more regular state. And, it's easier than you might think!

Practices to Calm the Body, Mind and Emotional Body

Below are some practices and exercises you can turn to in times of emotional suffering or turmoil.

Meditation

While being a traditional practice throughout human history, meditation has been scientifically shown to help calm the nervous system, among many other benefits.

Meditation is a great tool to calm our body and mind when we are feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Check out the Deep Dive section for more information on how meditation impacts the nervous system. Below are some links to some guided meditations for you to try. There are many more out there!

Before beginning a meditation, create a nice, calm and undistracted space you can be in and feel safe and quiet. Consider how you are feeling as you go into meditation and reflect on any changes or feelings you have after your meditation. Do not worry if your mind feels busy, there is no “right” way to meditate. Allow your mind to calm and when it gets busy, let your thoughts pass and come back to your breath as your center.

Links to Guided Meditations:

1. Short, [7-minute meditation](#) from *Hello Inner Light* to help calm the nervous system (Youtube, 7 min)
2. [Be the Change's Guided Meditation](#) to help come back into the body. You can practice this more than once to begin developing a language of energy, body and mind, while calming down your mind and body. (Soundcloud, 18 Min)
3. [Linda Hall Meditation](#) for complete relaxation and rest, release stress and calm the nervous system. (YouTube, 18 min)

Exercises:

1. [How Would You Treat a Friend](#) (Kristen Neff): This exercise can be done when you're noticing you are having or reflecting on a tough time with yourself. It can also be done in reflection of one of those times. If you are doing it for a present moment feeling, answer question two in reflection of that emotion.
2. [Compassion Break](#) (Kristen Neff): Learn to give yourself a loving break, when you are having a tough time.
3. [Supportive Touch](#) (Kristen Neff): Touch activates our parasympathetic nervous system to help us feel calm and safe. It also sends messages through the nervous system to the body to release important neurochemicals and other bodily processes that promote well being and security. This practice is quick and simple, and can be practiced daily for better results. Try supportive touch when you are feeling out of balance emotionally.

4. **Journal Your Thoughts and Feelings.** When you feel a build up of stress inside, or are feeling emotionally overwhelmed, grab a piece of paper or open your journal. Simply write your thoughts and feelings as if you are talking to yourself, taking as much time as you need to get it all out. At the end, offer yourself some compassion for how you are feeling. You might say an affirmation like, “today I allow myself to feel how I feel, without judgement,” or “I love myself and everything will be OK.” Some people find it satisfying to burn or destroy these pages, after, to release the negative self-talk. There’s no right or wrong way to do this journal entry, just allow yourself to be honest and open.

2.2 Activity 2: Consistent Practices to Build Our Self-Love Muscle

Below are some exercises and practices you can do to build your self-love muscle. Self-love practices are not just for when you are feeling down. Even if you’re feeling positive and kind towards yourself, you should still practice and feed that feeling. This will help you build resiliency to emotional challenges and create a compassionate relationship with yourself, ultimately making you happier and healthier in your daily life. With consistent practice, you can train your everyday state of being to be more peaceful, calm and positive. Surprise yourself! Try developing a daily self-love practice from the options below.

Consistent Practices for Developing Self-Love and Compassion

1. **Mindfulness and Mindful Journaling:** Start by becoming aware of any critical or negative voices you have toward yourself in your daily life. You might even jot down some thoughts as they arise, so you can track what you feel and when, which will uncover patterns for you. Turn to Kristen Neff’s exercise, [Changing your critical self talk](#) (journaling), to build an awareness of your inner voice and how you are with yourself, and over time change that voice to be more loving and compassionate.
2. **Daily journaling** (Kristen Neff): A daily Self-Compassion journaling exercise to express emotions and enhance our physical and mental well-being. You will explore anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain and learn to process these in a healthier way. You can do this at the end of each day, every few days or once in a while.

3. **Letter to a friend journaling exercise** (Kristen Neff). In this exercise you will honestly explore things you do not like about yourself and to find self-compassion for that part of you, by writing a letter to an imaginary friend who feels that way about themselves.
4. **Self-Love Practice: Take care of the caregiver - yourself.** Find a way to take intentional care of yourself and meet your own needs. For example, go on a 'self-date,' where you go to a special place you enjoy, do any activity you like, or spend time you have put aside where you can choose to do whatever you like without pressure of what you need to do later. Setting aside time for relaxation, rest and play is important to recharge your batteries, particularly as a changemaker. Simply by making yourself a priority by setting this time aside for yourself, you are practicing self-love.
5. **Mirror work:** Go to a mirror and to look at yourself deeply in the eyes. As you do so, choose to repeat any affirmation you would like, such as "I am more than enough," "I love you," "You are a powerful, loving person." If you discover there is a particular part of yourself that you would like to work on, you can choose a positive affirmation that is opposite to the negative language or belief you are trying to change. For example, if you feel you are always saying, "I suck at ...," or "I don't deserve....," or "I wish I were more..." you could use an affirmation like "I am doing my best at..," "I deserve love, and I deserve.... in my life, or "I am beautiful, I am loved." The more you try to really believe what you are saying, the more powerful the change will be in your over time. If you find this practice uncomfortable, ask yourself: why is that?
6. **Morning intentions (Journal or verbal):** Each morning, take a moment to set an intention for how you will be with yourself for the day. This might be a normal day, or a challenging one. Write your intentions out clearly in your journal, or say them to yourself either with your eyes closed or in the mirror. If there is a particular habit of negativity toward yourself, you could choose an affirmation or intention that actively works to change that. For example, if you find you offer yourself bad self talk when you are doing something in your day, for today, set an intention to be kind and loving with yourself while doing that activity, even when you find yourself in moments of non-self compassion. When we set intentions in the morning, we give our mind a base for the day and find it easier to organically make decisions, see opportunities or change our behaviour toward those intentions during the day. You might find a bad habit you have gets lost quicker than you thought, because you have set a clear intention to do otherwise.

7. **Meditation:** Practicing consistent meditation either daily or every other day is an amazing tool to reach a calmer normal state in your daily life. Imagine learning to become calm, even when you are sitting in the middle of a 'storm' in your life. This is a skill you can build through practice. There are many forms of meditation and you can find thousands online, long or short. Even 5 minutes a day will have benefits. You might also look for [an app](#) that can help you build a meditation practice. If you picture your mind and nervous system as a stream, what happens when there are too many rocks? The water level rises and its flow is obstructed. When we meditate, we help our mind and body move its rocks so our energy can flow more easily. If we let the rocks, our stressors, build up too much without clearing them out, we will experience more stress in our lives. Find a consistent meditation practice that works for you.

3. Deep Dive

The links below are complementary resources for you to explore topics of interest in greater depth.

Self Compassion, Dr. Kristin Neff: [Explore guided meditations for practicing self-love.](#)

[Dozens of links to Mindfulness, Compassion, Education and Meditation](#) (Dr. Kristin Neff)

[My Journey to Self-Love](#), Dr. Andrea Pennington, Ted Talk: A story of Andrea's journey to loving herself.

[Cultivating Unconditional Self-Worth](#) | Adia Gooden | TEDxDePaulUniversity: Ted talk about cultivating unconditional self-worth and compassion

Explore some benefits of meditation: [Mediation and the nervous system](#), Thomas Rutledge Ph.D, Psych Today

Explore research on the positive benefits of meditation: [Meditation: In Depth](#), National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health,

Kiran, & Arora, Anterpreet & Kaur, Deepinder & Thaman, Richa. (2011). [IMPACT OF MEDITATION ON AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM-A RESEARCH STUDY](#). Journal of Life Sciences. 1. 2277-2103144.

Explore 10 ways to soothe and calm the nervous system, as well as how some of it works: [10 Simple Protocols to Calm and Soothe the Nervous System](#), John Douillard's LifeSpa, YouTube.

Books:

A Return to Love by Marianne Williamson
<https://www.amazon.com/Return-Love-Reflections-Principles-Miracles/dp/0060927488>

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