ARTICLE
RECEIVING FEEDBACK
To Recover from Failure, Try Some Self-Compassion

by Christopher Germer
If a good friend tells you about an ordeal they’re facing or a mistake they’ve made, how do you typically respond? In all likelihood, you offer kindness and comfort, perhaps speaking in a warm and soothing tone, and maybe offering a hug to show how much you care. When your friend recovers and the conversation continues, chances are that you’ll expand your support by encouraging your friend to take necessary action or try to discover how to steer clear of similar difficulties.

Now reflect for a moment on how you treat yourself when you make a big mistake or experience a setback. It’s likely that you’re much tougher on yourself — that you spring to self-criticism (“I’m such an idiot!”), hide in embarrassment or shame (“Ugh!”), or ruminate for a long time on your perceived
shortcomings or bad luck (“Why did this happen to me?”). When things go wrong in our lives, we tend to become our own worst enemy.

To recover emotionally and get back on your feet, here’s an approach you can take: self-compassion.

I’ve been working with mindfulness in my psychotherapy practice for over 30 years. It is a powerful resource that helps people stay present and focused on the task at hand. I’ve come to realize, however, that a component of mindfulness that is essential for emotional resilience is often overlooked. In particular, when we fail in a big way, we’re likely to become engulfed in shame, and our sense of self is dismantled. We all know what this feels like: We’re unable to think straight, temporarily suspended in time and place, dislocated from our bodies, and uncertain who we really are. Shame has a way of wiping out the very observer who is needed to be mindful of our situation.

What does it take to rescue yourself and begin to address the situation effectively? You need to treat yourself with the same kindness and support that you’d provide for a friend.

There is a substantial and growing body of research that shows that self-compassion is closely associated with emotional resilience, including the ability to soothe ourselves, recognize our mistakes, learn from them, and motivate ourselves to succeed. Self-compassion is consistently correlated with a wide range of measures of emotional well-being, such as optimism, life satisfaction, autonomy, and wisdom, as well as with reduced levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and shame.

To achieve these benefits, self-compassion must include three components, according to my colleague and pioneering self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff:

- **Mindfulness.** Awareness of what’s going on in the present moment. To be kind to ourselves, we need to know that we’re struggling while we’re struggling. It helps to name the emotions we’re feeling in tricky situations and to ground ourselves in the here and now (sensations, sounds, sights). These are all skills associated with mindfulness that make space for a compassionate response.

- **Common humanity.** Knowing we’re not alone. Most of us tend to hide in shame when things go really wrong in our lives, or we hide from ourselves through distraction or with a few stiff drinks. The antidote is recognizing our common humanity — understanding that many others would feel the same way in similar situations and that we’re not the only ones who suffer in life.

- **Self-kindness.** A kind and warm-hearted response to ourselves. This can take many forms, such as a gentle hand over the heart, validating how we feel, talking to ourselves in an encouraging manner, or a simple act of kindness such as drinking a cup of tea or listening to music.

When we feel threatened, our nervous system is awash in adrenaline and goes into overdrive; when we’re in this state, showing ourselves care and kindness is usually the last thing we’re inclined to do. When we experience positive, warm connections, however, our system releases oxytocin, a feel-good hormone that downregulates the effects of adrenaline. Taking a mindful pause and then bringing
kindness to ourselves seems to activate our innate caregiving system and the calming effect of oxytocin, allowing the mind to clear and giving us a chance to take rational steps to resolve the issue.

Even though self-compassion is not the default option for most of us when things go wrong, anyone can learn to do it. Neff has developed an exercise you can use in everyday life when you need self-compassion the most. It is called the Self-Compassion Break (see the box below). It is based on the three components of self-compassion I’ve described. (This is just one exercise we offer as part of our empirically supported Mindful Self-Compassion training program.)

Self-Compassion Break

When you notice that you’re under stress or are emotionally upset, see if you can locate where the emotional discomfort resides your body. Where do you feel it the most? Then say to yourself, slowly:

“This is a moment of struggle”
That’s mindfulness. See if you can find your own words, such as:

“This hurts”
“This is tough”
“Ouch!”

“Struggle is a part of living”
That’s common humanity. Other options include:

“Other people feel this way”
“I’m not alone”
“We all struggle in our lives”

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, sensing the warmth and gentle touch of your hands, and say to yourself:

“May I be kind to myself.” “May I give myself what I need.”

Perhaps there are more specific words that you might need to hear right now, such as:

“May I accept myself as I am”
“May I learn to accept myself as I am”
“May I be safe”
“May I be strong”
“May I forgive myself”

If you’re having trouble finding the right language, it can help to imagine what you might say to a close friend struggling with that same difficulty. Can you say something similar to yourself, letting the words roll gently through your mind?

Consider the following example of the Self-Compassion Break in action. Your boss gave you a stretch assignment to lead a critical project. The project was a great success, due in large part to your skillful
leadership, and you believe you demonstrated that you’re ready for a promotion. But when you raise
the idea with your boss, she laughs dismissively and changes the subject. Livid with anger, you
retreat from the conversation, asking yourself why you bothered to work so hard in the first place
since you would never be recognized for it. Of course your boss wasn’t going to support you, or even
notice. Maybe she just wanted someone to do the heavy lifting to promote her own selfish agenda. Or
maybe you’re hopelessly out of touch and your performance really wasn’t as good as you thought it
was. When we’re in the grip of strong emotions, our minds run wild.

As a savvy businessperson, you might think that this would be the perfect moment to advocate for
yourself if it were only possible to make a balanced, compelling case for your promotion. But without
a moment of self-compassion, your emotional reactivity is likely to stand in your way. You’d put your
anger on display instead of showing off your leadership skills, or you’d let self-doubt eat at your
resolve to see the discussion through to an acceptable conclusion.

How do you activate self-compassion in the heat of the moment? Begin by acknowledging how you
feel. For example, recognizing that you might still feel angry (“She’s terrible and I hate her”);
victimized (“She made me go through all of that — for what?!”), or doubt (“Maybe she’s right that I
don’t deserve a promotion — I didn’t do that great a job after all”).

Next, acknowledge that others would probably have similar feelings in this situation. Requesting a
promotion after you’ve expanded your skills and taken on more responsibility is a reasonable thing to
do, and your emotional reaction to the rejection of that request is not out of line. Consider any
examples you know of others in similar situations. Perhaps Anika in the finance
department told you
last year that her promotion was denied, and you noticed how angry she was and how she doubted
her own worth. You are not alone.

Finally, express kindness to yourself. What would you say to a friend in your shoes? Perhaps you’d
say: “It’s rough being taken for granted” or “Whatever comes of it, that project was a huge success —
look at the numbers.” Also think about how you care for yourself already. Do you go for a run, pet
your dog, call a friend? If you do that when you’re suffering, that’s self-compassion.

Once you’ve shifted your frame of mind from a threat state to self-compassion, you’re likely find
yourself calmer and able to sit down and write a thoughtful and persuasive proposal about your
promotion, one that builds on your project success and exhibits your leadership potential under
stress.

In closing, a warning: Many people dismiss self-compassion because they think it flies in the face of
their ambition or hard-driving attitude, which are qualities that they think have made them
successful. But being self-compassionate doesn’t imply that you shouldn’t be ambitious or push
yourself to succeed. It’s about how you motivate yourself; instead of doing it with blame and self-
criticism, self-compassion motivates like a good coach, with encouragement, kindness, and support.
It’s a simple reversal of the Golden Rule: Learning to treat ourselves as we naturally treat others in need — with kindness, warmth, and respect.

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