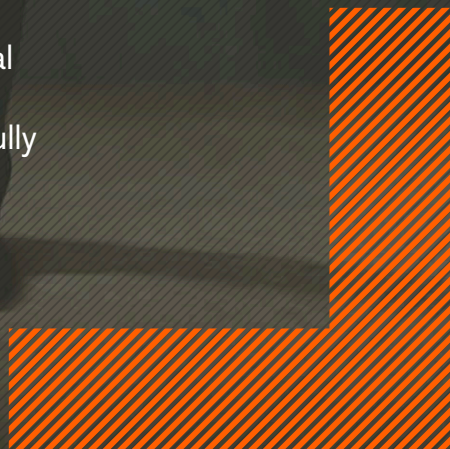


SELF-COMPASSION: TRY A LITTLE TENDERNESS

Still too often dismissed as weakness or self-indulgence, self-compassion is actually a fundamental strategy to maintain personal and professional resilience. At YSC, we encourage leaders to see its value in helping to manage ourselves and our people successfully through the COVID-19 pandemic.



WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

Resilience is a big topic right now, and unlikely to change any time soon, as we continue to adapt to unprecedented uncertainty. Many of us are juggling child-care and education responsibilities with our work. The ability to retain self-confidence and manage our energy is fast becoming an essential capacity we need to cultivate in both ourselves and our teams. We are trying new forms of exercise, new ways of connecting virtually, but we overlook the impact our self-talk has on our resilience. How is your self-talk helping or hindering your effectiveness at this time of increased pressure?

The concept of self-compassion has benefited from recent focus on academic research and has been found to have positive effects on physical wellbeing and psychological functioning. Yet it is still a rather unpopular concept – not a strategy that we typically think we should draw upon to improve our resilience, leadership effectiveness and business performance. It is time to start applying that strategy to ourselves.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SELF-COMPASSION?

Compassion is defined as “a sensitivity to the suffering of self and others, with a commitment to try to relieve it”. The need to engage with our emotions, to apply self-compassion is often seen as soft, at odds with our “achievement mind-set” and perhaps even for the “weak”. Compassion is not, however, about being nice, soft, or even weak. It is tough, and it takes courage. It requires a dedicated commitment to behave differently. Not only do we need to tune in to the very things that cause suffering (and the things we spend time trying to avoid), but we also need to do something about them. Dr Kristin Neff, pioneer in modern self-compassion practice, defines it as being composed of three elements:



Self-kindness: Being understanding towards ourselves when we fail or feel inadequate.



Common humanity: Recognizing that all humans suffer, being “human” means that one is mortal, vulnerable and imperfect.



Mindfulness: A non-judgmental, receptive mind state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them.

YSC's research into resilience, shows that many highly empathic leaders spend time being caring about others but forget to look after themselves. During the COVID-19 crisis, this behavior is more pronounced than ever. Leaders are investing in supporting their teams, making time for virtual coffees or check-ins, walking the virtual floor to ensure they remain visible and connected. Many leaders are finding work a relentless barrage of virtual calls, with days seeping into evenings and a blurring of boundaries. Putting it simply, leaders are over-stretching themselves, feeling exhausted and lacking the head-space for the most critical leadership activities of reprioritization, creating clarity of focus and purpose for their people.

SELF-COMPASSION IS HARD. IT IS NOT THE EASY OR LAZY OPTION

We often beat ourselves up to motivate ourselves, as a spur to action, or to punish ourselves for our mistakes and inadequacies. We believe that by letting go of it, we are exposing ourselves to negative consequences. However, research suggests the opposite is actually true. Have you ever beaten yourself up and felt more motivated or engaged? In reality, self-criticism makes us feel depressed, anxious and demotivated.

To be clear, we see a critical difference between helpful self-observation, self-analysis and self-evaluation – all effective ways of motivating ourselves, holding ourselves to account, and helping to maintain our standards – versus self-attacking and beating ourselves up, which is ultimately undermining and damaging. Studies have found that, far from lowering their standards, self-compassionate people are more likely to see their weaknesses and mistakes as changeable and are thus more likely to work to improve them and avoid making similar mistakes in the future.



SO, WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT? HERE ARE FIVE TIPS TOWARDS SELF-COMPASSION

The good news is that self-compassion is developable. We offer five simple practical suggestions that, when practiced regularly, will build a more self-compassionate mind-set. Our experience is that very quickly, you will find yourself easier to live with and more open to allowing yourself to succeed, fail and change.

1 Truly accept that failure is part of life and essential to the learning process

We often try to ameliorate our discomfort by criticizing ourselves or moving too quickly to resolve the issue. But if we can sit with an issue and understand our own pain without judging, we can learn how to bounce back much faster. In a moment of failure, simply notice what happens to you, your heartbeat, your breathing, your inner voice; acknowledge that feeling, recognize its power, then move on. It does not define you any more than success defines you.

2 Stop trying to control how we feel

Remember our emotions are not shameful. We didn't choose to feel anxious, worried or angry. Evolution gave us these emotions to keep us out of harm's way. The trouble is, they don't always work in our favor and can fire off too quickly and for too long. Paradoxically, mindfully noticing how we feel, and accepting that it's OK to feel this way, often results in feeling calmer. If we self-reflect with contempt and anger, make broad judgements, blame ourselves and assume mistakes will be permanent, we will find ourselves unable to develop encouragement for ourselves and truly learn.

3 Don't let our inner-critic run our lives

We often have beliefs about it being useful in some way (it's motivating, stops us being lazy or complacent, keeps us on your toes, makes us keep high standards etc). But in reality, it has the opposite effect, is demotivating, and makes us afraid of stepping out of our comfort zone. Have compassion for your "inner critic". It is trying to help you, but is it doing a good job?

4 Forgive ourselves

When things go wrong, far from lowering their standards, self-compassionate people are more likely to see their weaknesses and mistakes as changeable, and are thus more likely to work to improve them. Focus on the small, positive changes we could make, rather than berating ourselves for the things we did badly in the past. Ask yourself, 'should I expect to be as productive as I was pre-COVID-19'?

5 Treat ourselves as you would treat a friend

When we make a mistake, take a few deep breaths. Stop and ask yourself: "What would I say to a friend/spouse/child if they were feeling this way?" We are often a lot harder on ourselves than we are on other people. Why the double-standard?

Perhaps the simple solution is the next time things go wrong, or you are feeling overwhelmed from the uncertainty surrounding the crisis – ask yourself this: how can I acknowledge how I feel and then learn from this? Try a little tenderness. You might find it helps you feel that you are thriving more so than you are surviving through COVID-19, and also become happier and more effective in the longer-term.

LEARN MORE

YSC has a variety of Executive Coaching programs that can help your leaders in these stressful times.

Email info@ysc.com to find out how we can support your leaders.

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