

# THE NEWEST PARENTING SKILL: SELF-COMPASSION

**If you take care of yourself, you'll be happier and better at taking care of others.**

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The work of parenting involves caring for and meeting the needs of another human being 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And like all demanding professions, burnout is a hazard of the job.

## **What is self-compassion?**

We are all used to working on our self-esteem by asking ourselves, “Am I being a good parent or a bad parent?” The problem is that having high self-esteem is contingent upon experiencing success. If we don’t meet our own standards, we feel terrible about ourselves. Self-compassion, in contrast, is not a way of judging ourselves positively or negatively. It is a way of relating to ourselves kindly and embracing ourselves as we are, flaws and all.

## **There are three core components of self-compassion:**

**1. Treating ourselves with kindness:** When we fail to meet our own standards, we are often much harsher and more cruel to ourselves than we ever would be to a friend, or even someone we don’t like very much. Self-compassion reverses that pattern. In moments of difficulty or when making mistakes (especially when making mistakes), you treat yourself as you would treat a good friend in the same situation – with encouragement, sympathy, patience, and gentleness.

**2. Recognizing our common humanity:** When something goes wrong, we often view it as abnormal. “I shouldn’t have taken so long to get ready in the morning, making my daughter late for school. Parents like Karen are always on time.” You end up feeling isolated in your suffering when, in fact, our imperfections are exactly what connect us all. Self-esteem prompts us to ask, “How am I different than others?” Self-compassion involves wondering, “How am I the same?” And the answer is that we are all imperfect. There are probably many moments when Karen makes a mistake or gets things wrong, and that’s what makes you both humans and moms.

**3. Being mindful:** In order to be compassionate to ourselves, we need to be able to recognize that we are suffering. Paying attention to how we talk to ourselves and treat ourselves in challenging moments lets us see that we are hurting and that we need to give ourselves love, too. Think of all the self-inflicted turmoil and stress we cause by constantly criticizing our imperfections: “I’m such a slob and the house looks like a pigsty.” or “I’m too bad at math to help my son with his home practice.” Once we notice and become aware of how painful and counterproductive these self-attacks are, we can take another approach - being kind and supportive to ourselves when we don’t meet our parenting ideals.

One of the things unique to mammals is that we are programmed to respond to warmth, gentle touch, and soft vocalizations. That’s what keeps vulnerable infants close to their mothers and safe from harm. So when we provide that kind of touch and calm reassurance to ourselves, we actually reduce levels of stress hormones and boost the feel-good ones. Then we feel safe, comforted, and in the optimal frame of mind to do our best.

And that, of course, is every parent’s goal. One from which we will fall short time and time again. But that is the beautiful, messy lesson of human experience. And if we are able to recognize that and keep our hearts open to ourselves, we can be more open-hearted with everyone else, especially our kids.