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The Promise of Self-Compassion for Stressed-Out Teens

By Rachel Simmons

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At a lunchtime workshop at Princeton for overscheduled, underslept college students a few years ago, I was teaching a three-step practice of self-compassion. The practice encourages a stance of self-kindness in the face of setbacks. One 19-year-old college athlete looked askance.

“So, you want me to be nice to myself when I mess up?” she asked. I nodded.

“Doesn’t that mean that I’ll just sit in my room all day in my pajamas and watch Netflix?” she asked. Her classmates laughed knowingly. For many in this driven generation, more of whom than ever now rank themselves as more competitive than their peers, self-criticism is their Red Bull. By their logic, you can’t move yourself forward, racking up achievements and building out your résumé, without beating yourself up.

The problem, researchers say, is that while self-criticism may give us a swift kick in the pants, it elevates symptoms of anxiety and depression in the long run. And this generation of adolescents can hardly afford much more unhappiness: Today’s teenagers are plagued by more distress than any generation on record.

According to research by the psychologist Jean Twenge and others, depressive symptoms in teen girls increased by 50 percent between 2012 and 2015, and 21 percent in boys. The number of college students experiencing “overwhelming anxiety” increased to 62 percent in 2016 from 50 percent in 2011.

Enter self-compassion. First measured by Kristin Neff of the University of Texas at Austin, the trait has been shown by researchers to ease symptoms of psychopathology in adults, while bolstering motivation and high performance standards. In other words, you can be nice to yourself and succeed, absent the Netflix and pajamas.

Psychologists have now turned their attention to self-compassion in adolescents. Their initial findings reveal an unusually powerful intervention for stressed out young adults, a potential crown jewel of resilience interventions.

Late last year, Imogen Marsh, Stella Chan and Angus Macbeth at the University of Edinburgh published a meta-analysis of research on self-compassion in young people in the journal *Mindfulness*. They synthesized studies on more than 7,000 adolescents from six countries, ranging in age from 10 to 19. They found that teens with high levels of the trait were most likely to report lower levels of distress caused by anxiety and depression — especially when facing chronic academic stress.

Adolescence is a developmental moment of peak stress, and a teen's heightened self-consciousness ("Do I look weird? Did I just sound stupid in class?") cranks up the volume of the inner critic. Self-compassion encourages mindfulness, or noticing your feelings without judgment; self-kindness, or talking to yourself in a soothing way; and common humanity, or thinking about how others might be suffering similarly.

This last step is particularly salubrious for adolescents: Many believe that "I'm the only one going through this," which exacerbates feelings of isolation and shame.

The teens I work with are prone to catastrophizing when facing a problem ("I'll never get into college," "I'll never get a good job"). For them, the mindfulness step of self-compassion — which asks them to zero in on a feeling instead of an imagined, exaggerated outcome — is especially grounding. My students find self-kindness most challenging, so I ask them to imagine how they would comfort a close friend struggling with the same challenge. "There's almost no one whom we treat as badly as ourselves," Dr. Neff told me.

Skeptics like the Princeton athlete in my workshop worry that self-compassion is

indolence in disguise: an excuse to lower your standards or give up instead of “sucking it up” and dealing. As an educator from a mostly immigrant, bootstrapping family, I once might have agreed with her. Self-compassion is precisely the kind of New-Agey trend some of my crustier relatives might have called piffle, a way to brush off mistakes instead of owning them.

But research shows that self-compassion does not diminish integrity or standards of accountability. Instead, it lets you own up to a tough moment without paying for it with your self-worth. This new logic teaches students that they don’t have to be perfect to be worthy.

I have been stunned by the reaction of students of all ages to the practice. In a public high school auditorium in Hopewell Valley, N.J., in November, I led more than 600 juniors and seniors through a self-compassion meditation. I asked them to place their hands on their hearts, and to feel the pressure and warmth of a kind hand. Their silence was respectful and profound. Many students were crying. They had never thought to approach their own setbacks with gentleness.

At a local elementary school in Northampton, Mass., I volunteer teaching self-compassion to children as young as 5. Kindergartners share embarrassing moments (“I fell off the monkey bars in front of my friends”) and practice hugging themselves as a form of self-soothing. First graders sit in a circle holding hands, reminding each other they are not alone.

But self-compassion may be most critical in adolescence, when researchers say it is at its lowest levels. This is especially true for teen girls, who show the lowest levels of self-compassion of any group of youth, and who experience a sudden drop in the trait between middle and high school.

Late last year the first self-compassion curriculum for teens, “Making Friends With Yourself: A Mindful Self-Compassion Program for Teens and Young Adults,” was developed by Karen Bluth, assistant professor at the University of North Carolina’s School of Medicine, and Lorraine Hobbs, director of the youth and family programs at the University of California San Diego Center for Mindfulness.

Inspired by a similar curriculum for adults created by Dr. Neff and the psychologist Christopher Germer, the program's evaluations revealed lowered stress in middle and high school participants, compared with those in a control group. Participants also had lower anxiety and depression, and elevated resilience and healthy risk taking.

To teach their children how to show themselves grace in the face of a challenge, I coach parents to model self-compassion in the face of everyday setbacks. Instead of cursing at yourself when you lose your keys, verbalize mindfulness: "I am feeling so frustrated right now." When describing a disappointment at work, demonstrate what self-kindness sounds like: "I did my best, and I'll make sure not to make that mistake next time." When you burn dinner, recognize common humanity: "Well, I'm pretty sure I'm not the only bummed out parent feeding their kids pizza tonight."

Among college students, the need for such thinking is high. A 2016 report from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, using data from 139 college and university counseling centers, found a surge in demand for mental health services, with anxiety and depression the most common concerns. As schools scramble to handle it, they might consider training peer educators and professional staff members in self-compassion.

If more students use self-compassion to reframe their failures, they may discover more nourishing sources of motivation and healthier strategies to pursue their goals.

Correction: Feb. 23, 2018

An earlier version of this article omitted the names of two people who were co-creators of self-compassion programs. They are Lorraine Hobbs, who worked on the teen curriculum, and Christopher Germer, on the adult version.

Rachel Simmons is co-founder of Girls Leadership and the author of "[Enough As She Is: How to Help Girls Move Past Impossible Standards of Success to Live Healthy, Happy, and Fulfilling Lives.](#)"

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