

Introduction

**“I used to say, ‘If you will take care of me, I will take care of you.’
Now I say, ‘I will take care of me for you if you will take care of you for me.’”**

— Jim Rohn

WHY IS SELF-COMPASSION FOR TEENS IMPORTANT?

Teens are suffering from relationship difficulties, body image problems, concentration issues, school pressure, parental criticism, teacher demands, substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, as well as the challenges associated with emerging adulthood identity. School is intended to train people in how to live healthy, happy, and productive lives, however, current educational practices deprive students of the time, space, and opportunities needed to learn about themselves. Worse yet, many students are traumatized by archaic educational practices that promote cyclical and systemic human problems. *Educational Trauma* is a spectrum of events that victimize students, parents, and educators. On the mildest end, it is the anxiety students feel around test pressures and standardized academic expectations. This anxiety can also be experienced by parents and educators for different reasons, and is the result of placing maladaptive pressures on youngsters and their caregivers. Educational Trauma increases in severity with many other events that cause harm and long-term consequences, such as: the use of stimulant medication to control atypical student behavior, the use of criminal justice to discipline students of color in low-income public schools, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Teens need guidance in how to face and identify pain and suffering. Not just for their own sake and self-care practice, but also to respond and care for others in moments of pain. The practices in this book offer immediate and actionable ways of helping teens confront hardships with the confidence that even very difficult problems deserve the willingness to attempt resolution. With educational practices contributing to student distress, there is an urgent need for these types of tools, skills, and practices so teens can thrive, even in very challenging situations.

Let us be clear that self-compassion is promoted with the intention to extend compassion to others once one's needs are adequately sated. Thinking about the airplane attendant's instructions prior to take-off: “When traveling with small children, or those in need of assistance, please place the oxygen mask on yourself first—then help your traveling companion.” Self-compassion is the act of putting the proverbial oxygen facemask on your own face first, so you can help others. There are many who would say it is easier to give to others than it is to give to themselves. This concept relates to the power of self-compassion in amplifying compassion for others. When we prioritize the needs and suffering of others over our own, we essentially limit our helpfulness to others in their moments of need. By not placing the proverbial oxygen mask on ourselves first, we only have a limited amount of oxygen/energy to help others before petering out. Teaching self-compassion practices to teens empowers them to set boundaries, care for themselves, cope with the intensity of suffering, and take action to relieve their own suffering so that they may serve others too.

The activities contained in this practice book are associated with decreased symptoms of depression, and increased life satisfaction. Research (Neff, 2011) demonstrates that self-compassion increases resilience and well-being, while decreasing depression and anxiety. Adolescents benefit from training in self-compassion because it gives them tools for seeing moments of suffering with open, balanced attention and kindness to themselves. It cultivates curiosity about oneself, and strengthens neuronal connections that promote health and healing. Self-compassion teaches teens that their moments of suffering are commonly felt by others, thereby reducing some of the isolating and painful moments common in adolescence. *Self-Compassion for Teens* is a collection of activities, practice sheets, and self-reflections that train teens in a foundation for kindness to themselves and others. The way we treat ourselves inevitably influences how we are with others, and therefore self-compassion contributes to healthier relationships. Many teens really want a good friend, who is always right there with them. Practicing self-compassion reveals this inner best friend, and reminds us of Ghandi's words: "Be the change you wish to see in the world." When we train teens to treat themselves well, they in turn treat others well, and create communities that are friendly to everyone. Self-compassionate teens may represent the healthiest future outlook for mitigating Educational Trauma, and for this reason it is timely and urgent to share this work with teens in your life.

HOW WILL TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND CLINICIANS BENEFIT FROM THIS WORK?

The launching of teens into adulthood is becoming an increasingly problematic stage of development for North American families. Teens are suffering from trauma, pressure, and committing suicide as a result (Gray, 2013). Students who succeed in high school and enter college are failing to complete college at alarming rates. Students who make it to college are finding themselves too burned out to complete their degrees. This is far worse for students of color, and those living in poverty. One response to this depth of suffering is a tendency for children to rely on their parents (or public assistance programs) for longer than in earlier generations, and to return to live in the family home after years away. The suffering that begins in the teen years impacts future functioning, as well as the health and prosperity of families and communities. The techniques and tools in this book are short and easy to apply, teachings that promote adolescents' academic success and healthy launching into adulthood. Parents, educators, and clinicians need to promote self-compassion in teens because it increases positivity, leads others to be happy too, and creates a framework for holding positive and negative feelings/experiences at once. This practical book offers many activities, meditations, and practices that heal trauma, widen emotional capacity, promote healthy sexual and gender development, improve executive functioning, and increase overall happiness. Teaching self-compassion to teens is one way of loving them, while training them to love and heal themselves. It represents an example of "teacherly love," a concept integrating the essence of teachers, parents, and helping professionals who care for young people (Goldstein, 1997).

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Jump in! Yes, anywhere! You can turn to the table of contents, select the chapter you're most interested in, and begin there. If your teen is traumatized, start with Chapter 8 and the **Self-Compassion Training Protocol for Traumatized Teens**, otherwise you can begin anywhere.

If you're a parent, and you have a struggling teen, consider using these activities, only in times when your teen is calm, well-regulated, and personally engaged in the practice. These activities build skills when practiced in moments of peace. (Very few practices are designed for moments of crisis.) This practice book is not intended to de-escalate crisis moments, however training in self-compassion can reduce the frequency and duration of difficult moments.

As an educator, including relevant activities from this workbook in your classroom routine will cultivate social emotional skills in your students, while fostering the resilience needed to be successful in school.

If you're a clinician, and your next patient is struggling with substance abuse, for example, turn to any page in Chapter 10, and voilà, you'll have interventions, practice sheets, and activities you can use right then and there.

This practice book is a complete collection designed for use by adults training teens in the cultivation of self-compassion. While you can implement each activity in isolation, no one chapter, nor the entire workbook, is intended as a complete treatment/training program. These activities are supplemental tools to be used with other interventions and/or plans. This practice book is intended for three audiences, and has two parts.

Three Audiences

1 FIRST, this practice book is equally approachable by parents, educators, and clinicians. For parents, you can use these activities in the whole family for greatest impact. Parents, these activities have been adapted from many adult activities and described in ways appropriate to different teen populations. Since self-compassion practices are also components of healthy approaches to parenting, it benefits whole families when just one parent commits to and cultivates self-compassion. Feel free to use any of the activities in this practice book yourself. I do!

2 SECOND, educators represent one of the groups affected by *Educational Trauma*, with the unique position of having their jobs and sustainability threatened by policy and practices. Educators need compassion because the allure of a teaching career has morphed into a source of abuse. In her 2008 book, *White Chalk Crime*, Karen Horwitz details the horrific teacher abuses she collected from educators nationwide. Educators who use the practices in this book themselves, and/or with their students, create a classroom environment that is kind and respectful, wholesome, and healthy. It is the opposite of the environments that breed bullying, while simultaneously healing educators, and their students, who've encountered *Educational Trauma*. Self-compassion practices in classrooms offer all those stressed and hurting by school procedures an opportunity to begin healing. Healing the self heals the world.

3 THIRD, this workbook is an effective companion for clinicians working with teens. Clinicians include a wide range of professionals who care for youngsters, such as: speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, social workers, and more. The activities build essential skills such as mindful awareness, executive functioning, social skills, as well as coping and self-regulation abilities. Kindness toward oneself and realizing that humans everywhere suffer, just like we do, has a healing effect. When clinicians practice these activities alone, and/or with their patients, they cultivate more compassion in the world too. **Some activities and worksheets are designed to be given directly to teens to complete.**

1 What Is Self-Compassion?

Self-compassion is the cultivation of qualities of friendliness towards oneself. There are four components to cultivating self-compassion:

1. **Mindful awareness**
2. **Kindness to ourselves** (metta: loving kindness and willingness to take action to relieve suffering)
3. **Shared humanity**
4. **The willingness to act to relieve suffering**

The following five activities promote each of the components mentioned previously, and form the basic foundation of cultivating self-compassion:

1. **Selective Attention** (preparatory activity for 25 Breaths, or any other mindfulness meditation)
2. **25 Breaths**
3. **Watching Thoughts and Feelings**
4. **Loving Kindness**
5. **Just Like Me. . .**

2. 25 BREATHS

Learn

There are many ways of increasing mindful awareness skills—often by paying attention to the breath, but not always. Research (Hölzel et al., 1999) shows that practicing activities like 25 Breaths contributes to an increased sense of well-being and peace, while increasing density of gray matter in the hippocampus. This brain area is associated with learning, memory, self-awareness, compassion, and introspection.

Here is one breath awareness activity you can use to help teens increase mindful awareness skills.

Practice

- Explain: Sitting or laying down in a comfortable position, close your eyes, if you feel comfortable doing so.
- You may also focus your gaze softly, and downward on one place in front of you.
- Once settled, focus your attention on your breath.
- Notice it moving in through your nostrils, and down into your lungs.
- Feel your lungs rise and fall with every breath.
- See if you can breathe deeply enough to fill your belly up at least two times.
- Once you are grounded in your body and connected to your breath, count each in-breath and out-breath as one—like this:
 - Inhale—one, exhale—one.
 - Inhale—two, exhale—two.
 - Inhale—three, exhale—three.
- Encourage your teen to continue counting inhale and exhale breaths until they reach twenty-five.
- At twenty-five, count backward—like this:
 - Inhale—twenty-five, exhale—twenty-five.
 - Inhale—twenty-four, exhale—twenty-four.
 - Inhale—twenty-three, exhale—twenty-three . . . and so on, until counting leads right back to one.
- Most people are expected to lose count, and the instruction is to just begin again at number one whenever it happens.
- Reassure your teen that it is okay to lose count; it is precisely how we practice moving our attention back to where we want it. When we do so kindly, and with loving allowance, it becomes much easier to focus for longer periods of time.

4 Self-Compassion for Teens

- Set a timer and practice 25 Breaths with your teen for two, three, or five minutes depending on how long your teen is willing to practice.
- Even a little bit helps!
- It is very important for your teen to freely choose this practice, and the length of time that is most comfortable to them.
- Increasing the session time gradually is encouraged, however not necessary to reap benefits.

Modification

- For teens with excellent mental control, encourage them to count to a higher number like fifty or one hundred.
- For teens who become proficient with twenty-five breaths, increase it by intervals of twenty-five breaths until they reach one hundred.
- For those having difficulty with twenty-five, start with only ten breaths.

It doesn't matter what number is set as the goal, as long as it does not change mid practice.

Reflect

Dialogue with your teen about what it was like to practice 25 Breaths. Ask the following questions:

- What was it like to focus on your breath and count at the same time?
- Sometimes in the middle of breath-work practices, people suddenly feel like it is pointless. Did that thought arise for you?
- Was your body drawing your attention during the activity?

3. WATCHING THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

Learn

Mindfulness is achieved through mental training, which teaches us how to calm our busy minds, settle wild and changing emotions, as well as the art of detaching from our very own thoughts. Remind your teen that our thoughts and feelings may seem very real, but they aren't necessarily true. Here is how to train teens to notice thoughts and feelings, while also practicing letting them go.

Practice

- Find a comfortable position.
- If you need to move, this can be a walking practice. Standing is another option. Whichever position draws your attention/preference most, commit to it for a period of 2, 3, or 5 minutes.
- If this activity leaves you feeling uncomfortable at any time, please stop and share your observations.
- Take a deep breath into your belly. Feel the flow of air move into your nostrils, inflating your lungs and belly, before moving upward and out again.
- Take two more deep belly breaths.
- During this short period, set your intention to notice feelings and thoughts that come to your awareness.
- Setting your intention means making a silent mental commitment to do something or be a certain way (more on setting intentions in Chapter 4):
- Try to remain unattached to the thoughts and feelings that arise. There may be many; there may be few. Just allow and watch.
- Imagine you are watching a movie in your mind's eye. The movie is made up of thoughts and feelings that come and go.
- It's okay to suddenly feel like you have to go do something—anything—other than this activity. See if you can resist the temptation to do whatever else is more appealing.
- When a feeling arises, silently say to yourself, "Right now, I am feeling an emotion."
- Try to resist examining the feeling, finding the source, and/or allowing yourself to feel it too deeply. Remember this is an activity in mental training.
- Thoughts and feelings could arise; the objective is to notice them.
- When a thought arises, silently say to yourself, "Right now, I am thinking."
- While this may seem pointless and boring, it is a very effective way to learn to control your own mind.

Reflect

- How was it to label your thoughts and emotions for a few minutes?
- Were there a lot of thoughts/feelings?

Modification

The Loving and Kind Friendly Wishes (Metta) activity may be practiced with others in mind, after practiced repeatedly for oneself. Usually in this order:

- Self
- Benefactor, mentor, or role model (i.e., Dalai Lama)
- Loved one
- Neutral party
- Person with whom there is conflict
- All beings everywhere

When having difficulty with another person, teens may reduce their own suffering by sending Loving and Kind Friendly Wishes to the other person, after using the “Along With Me. . .” practice. Though challenging to send kindness to people with whom we are in conflict, it softens us to do so, thereby reducing our suffering. The Buddha said, “Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.” Remind your teen that the other person may not even be aware of the pain felt, and so taking action within soothes and heals while reducing conflict.

Reflect

After many silent repetitions, ask teens to discuss what it is like for them to send themselves friendly wishes.

- Would it be any different if they were sending their friends or loved ones friendly wishes?
- Invite teens to practice sending friendly wishes to someone they love, and then comparing the experiences of sending them to yourself as opposed to a loved one.
- Invite teens to practice metta for themselves on a daily basis for maximum effect.

5. "ALONG WITH ME. . ."

Learn

"Along with me. . ." is a practice that promotes awareness of shared humanity, particularly with regard to everyone's desire to be happy and free of suffering. It is the antidote to "Why Me" Syndrome. Whenever you encounter a teen who is struggling with feeling alone, and in pain, practicing this activity may help remind him or her just how interconnected we all are. When we are reminded of being connected with others in times of suffering, it can activate oxytocin, which is associated with closeness, feelings of warmth and attachment. It's been called the "Hug Hormone," "Moral Molecule," "Cuddle Chemical," and "Love Hormone" because it increases through connection with others, while promoting fond fraternal feelings, moral drives, and overall joy. This practice contributes to rewiring the brain for improved attachment, and/or healing from attachment wounds.

This practice is suitable for both groups and individuals.

Practice

When teens are settled in a group (or individually with you), invite them to go around the room (or in their mind), and for each person they see, say:

"Along with me, _____ wants to be happy." (Fill in the blank with the name of the person the teen is looking at, or imagining in her or his mind's eye.)

"Along with me _____ wants to be free of harm."

Repeat the phrase:

"Along with me, _____ wishes to be happy and safe." for everyone in the room, or in the individual teen's mind.

- Invite individual teens to think of their peers, siblings, family members, parents, teachers, etc., bringing each one clearly to mind before silently saying the phrase over and over again.
- For an individual teen, this activity is also beneficial when focusing on just one person, and repeating the phrase several times.
- Ideally, this activity would be introduced and practiced during moments of calm centeredness, to be called on during moments of need. It is unlikely to be beneficial as a method of diffusing crisis, if introduced for the first time during a crisis.

Reflect

- What is it like to concentrate on how others also want to be happy, just like you?
- When I say, "We are all interconnected," what comes to mind?

6. WHAT IS COMPASSION? HOW IS IT DIFFERENT FROM SELF-COMPASSION?

Learn

Self-compassion has an element of common humanity, and directly influences the level of compassion we are capable of showing to others. Dr. Thupten Jinpa, the translator for the Dalai Lama, described compassion as a natural sense of concern in the presence of someone else's needs or suffering, and a desire or resolve to contribute to that person's relief. He identifies three aspects of compassion:

1. Awareness borne out of mindfully paying attention
2. Empathy: the emotional connection to others
3. Motivation: the impulse to act

According to Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, compassion is defined as the ability to recognize suffering in others, and the willingness to act to relieve it. This working definition holds two parts:

1. Recognition of suffering
2. Willingness to act

Conversely, self-compassion is comprised of three components: (a) mindful awareness, (b) kindness to self, (c) common humanity, all of which also create the foundation for compassion toward others. When we cultivate open, balanced attention (mindful awareness), we increase our capacity to perceive suffering. Being kind to oneself sets the tone for being kind to others, and common humanity reminds us that in suffering we are still connected to others, rather than separate and alone. Taken together, these are also the basic skills for recognizing suffering in others, and being willing to act to relieve it.

7. GIVING AND RECEIVING COMPASSION

Learn

Some people feel more comfortable giving compassion than receiving it. There is a good feeling that comes with giving, and a vulnerable feeling that goes along with receiving. The following practice sheet is designed to cue memories and instances of giving and receiving compassion.

Practice

Fill out the worksheet on the next page.

Modification

For groups:

- Sit in dyads/triads/quads as appropriate to the number of teens in the group.
- Invite each teen to connect with the experience of giving/receiving compassion.
- Each person takes 2 minutes to describe the experience of giving/receiving the compassion recalled in the direction mentioned previously.
- Others listen without speaking.
- At the end of 2 minutes, the “listeners” get 2 minutes each to reflect back what they heard.
- Listeners do not have to “fill up” all 2 minutes, if he or she has only a little to say. If this is the case, the entire group sits silently until the 2 minutes are up.
- Repeat the exercise until all participants have been heard and reflected back to.

Reflect

- The group modification is a profound practice in teaching individuals respectful, reflective, compassionate listening skills.

Discussion Topics

- What differences did you notice between practicing self-compassion vs. compassion for others?
- Is everyone entitled to compassion?
- How might we offer compassion to people who are very different from us?

Reflect

- Discuss self-esteem and self-criticism.
- Explore the nature of ego, how it is ever changing as we grow, learn, and develop.
- Encourage teens to hold on to their own self-worth regardless of what is happening around them.

* WORKSHEET *

GIVING AND RECEIVING COMPASSION

Received compassion from someone else	Gave compassion to someone else	How did it feel?