

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because It Can Teach Us How to Be Kinder to Ourselves

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When you look back on your life, you may think about a time when you failed at something. Maybe there was a time when you failed an important exam, or a time when you messed up a big presentation at work. Maybe there was something you just can't forget about, even though you wish you could.

Failures seem to be universal and inevitable in our lives, and they can be really impactful. However, people differ in how they perceive failures. Some people may think that failures are aversive—a thing that should be avoided or else may lead to depression. Other people may believe that failures are chances for personal growth, just like the inspiring, if clichéd, quote, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”

What causes these different views of failures? [My colleagues and I suggest that self-compassion is an important ingredient to make lemonade from lemons in our lives.](#)

Just like we treat our friends and family compassionately, we can extend our compassion toward ourselves.

Psychological research has documented the benefits of self-compassion. For example, self-compassionate people show better mental health, higher life satisfaction, and higher motivation for self-improvement. Psychological programs and experimental approaches to cultivate self-compassion are now available, and research confirms the effectiveness of such interventions.

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According to [Neff and colleagues](#), people who show self-compassion tend to take a positive outlook in life. They show genuine care and understanding toward themselves. They connect their own experiences with those of others. Finally, they pay balanced attention to their inner thoughts and emotions without ruminating.

We assumed that self-compassion might shape the beliefs and perception of failures specifically. We thought that when self-compassionate people fail at something, they would likely say to themselves, “I feel sad now because of what happened. It is okay to feel this way, and most people would experience the same feeling if they were in the same situation. I can take a break and calm down, and then I'll move on.”

Additionally, because self-compassion orients people to see the big picture of their experiences, it might also increase more adaptive beliefs that failures are learning opportunities for personal growth: yes, I failed, but what did I learn and how did I grow?

Across two studies, we tested this assumption using self-report questionnaires and an experimental approach to induce self-compassion. In Study 1, Japanese undergraduates answered questionnaires to measure self-compassion

and beliefs about failure (such as, “Failure is the greatest opportunity for growth,” and “I should never fail”). They reported on their self-esteem, a positive attitude toward the self.

What We Found: Self-Compassion Shapes Beliefs About Failures

Indeed, self-compassionate people were more likely to report that failures are learning opportunities and less likely to believe that failures are aversive experiences and should be avoided. Additionally, these associations between self-compassion and beliefs about failure were not simply due to self-esteem, suggesting that self-compassion was a key to holding adaptive beliefs about failures.

In the next study, we tested the impact of being instructed to become self-compassionate. Would that produce more adaptive, growth-oriented beliefs about failures?

After recalling their weaknesses (“I often procrastinate my school work”), Japanese undergraduates engaged in one of three writing tasks for three minutes.

Some were instructed to be self-compassionate, and wrote down kind and compassionate messages toward themselves (“I do not need to be so harsh on myself because every student may have a hard time doing school work”). Others were told to be self-reflective, and wrote down their strengths (“I am good at socializing with others”). Finally, a third group of students listed as many prefectures in Japan as possible (as a comparison group). Then, all of the students answered the same questions as before.

As we hoped, compared with the comparison group, students in the self-compassion condition reported higher self-compassion, higher growth-oriented beliefs about failures, and lower beliefs that failures are aversive and should be avoided. On the other hand, self-reflective writing was not related to self-compassion or beliefs about failures.

“Simply writing self-compassionate messages seems to be sufficient for shaping growth-oriented beliefs about failures.”

Our results are promising in that simply writing self-compassionate messages seems to be sufficient for shaping growth-oriented beliefs about failures. So, even if you think that you are low in self-compassion, there is a good chance that you can develop self-compassion with practice.

Failures may be sour, but with self-compassion, people may be able to make lemonade from lemons.

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