

How Would You Treat a Friend?

Compare how you talk to a struggling friend with how you talk to yourself — then close the gap.



15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Casual

1 Why you should try it

Research suggests that people are usually harder on themselves than they are on others. Rather than motivating them to succeed, this often makes a mistake or stressful situation even more stressful — to the point that they'll simply avoid new or challenging experiences for fear of failing and eliciting a new wave of self-criticism.

This exercise asks you to notice the differences between the way you typically treat the people you care about and the way you typically treat yourself. It also asks you to consider why there may be differences between the two, and to contemplate what would happen if you treated yourself as compassionately as you treat others. Research suggests that treating yourself more compassionately can benefit your physical and mental health.

2 The session — Prof. Magee's 15-minute protocol

Follow these timings, not the website's. Set a timer. One session = the 15 minutes below, then 5 minutes of journaling immediately after. At least 4 sessions in your 2-week window — each session on a different struggle or a different friend.

4'

4'

3'

4'

4 MIN How you treat a friend

Take out paper. Think about times when a close friend feels really bad about themselves or is really struggling. How do you respond (when you're at your best)? Write down what you typically *do* and *say*, and note the *tone* you use.

4 MIN How you treat yourself

Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself? Write down what you do and say, and the tone. Be honest — write the actual words.

3 MIN Name the gap

Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently? (Common answers: "I'd get lazy," "I don't deserve it," "that's just how I am.")

4 MIN Rewrite the script

Write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself, when you're suffering, the same way you respond to a close friend. Then pick one current struggle and write two or three sentences to yourself in the friend's voice. Next time you're struggling, try it for real and see what happens.

3 Then journal — 5 minutes, by hand

- Top of the entry: **date and time**. Entries without both lose credit.
- Write for **5 minutes without stopping** (about 300 words). Messy is fine; stopping is not.
- Before / during / after: how did you feel at each point? Be specific — body, mood, thoughts.
- What surprised you? What felt fake, awkward, or easier than expected?
- **Prompt:** What were the exact words your inner critic used? Where did you learn that voice?
- **Prompt:** Did the friend-voice feel fake, or did some part of you relax? Did you try it in real life this week?

4 Evidence that it works

Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. (2012)

Participants in an eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program, which included learning exercises like this one, reported feeling greater self-compassion at the end of the program than they had at the beginning — and greater than a comparison group that didn't participate. The MSC participants also reported greater mindfulness and life satisfaction, and lower depression, anxiety, and stress, than the comparison group.

Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2013)

Participants who recalled a time when they gave emotional support to a friend, or who gave actual support (in writing) to another person, reported greater self-compassion for themselves around a problem with which they were struggling, compared with participants who didn't think about supporting a friend.

5 Why it works

Research suggests that the way people treat themselves is shaped in part by how others have treated them, but it can also be influenced by how they treat others. Because people often find it more natural to be compassionate toward others than toward themselves in a challenging situation, one way to increase self-compassion is to imagine what one would say to a friend in a similar position, then direct those same sentiments toward oneself. Reflecting on how kind you are capable of being toward others can remind you that you are also capable of being kind toward yourself — and that you deserve compassion, too. By treating yourself with sympathy and understanding rather than beating yourself up, you help yourself bounce back from challenging situations with greater resilience.

6 Know the research — for your presentation (APA 7)

In your presentation you will explain, **from memory and without notes**, the evidence behind each practice — who studied it, when, and what they found — plus something *not* written on the GGIA site or on this handout. Read these papers (SJNY library or Google Scholar), then follow their citations forward to find **your own article** — one more peer-reviewed study on this topic that is not the source study here (due Sun Dec 6). Take photos along the way; they are your slides.

Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. (2012). A pilot study and randomized controlled trial of the mindful self-compassion program. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(1), 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.21923>

Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2013). Activating the inner caregiver: The role of support-giving schemas in increasing state self-compassion. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(1), 58–64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.07.015>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/how_would_you_treat_a_friend. Practice sources: Kristin Neff, Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin; Center for Mindful Self-Compassion. Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.