



# 3 SELF-COMPASSION EXERCISES

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FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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Positive Psychology Program B.V.  
Gandhiplein 16  
6229HN MAASTRICHT  
The Netherlands

<https://PositivePsychologyProgram.com>

# Welcome

We have sometimes been asked what we consider the most important topic in psychology. For us, this would be self-compassion. Why? Because we learned through experience, in our own life and the life of our clients, that it affects virtually everything. We believe the relationship we have with ourselves shapes our daily experiences profoundly. If we do not accept ourselves for who we are and feel that we can only be “enough” if we reach certain standards, we are bound to a life of suffering. We hope that the tools presented here will help you and the people around you to become a better friend of themselves. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

<https://positivepsychology.com/toolkit/>

All the best!

Seph Fontane Pennock  
Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.

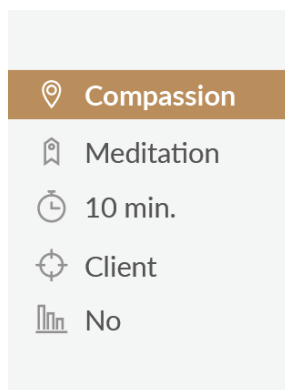


## Using the tools

Self-compassion involves treating the self with care and concern when considering personal inadequacies, mistakes, failures, and painful life situations.

This product contains 3 different self-compassion tools. Each tool is structured in the same way, consisting of a background section, a goal description, advice for using the exercise and suggested readings.

On the first page of every tool, a legend is shown, consisting of several icons:



- The first icon displays the main category the tool belongs to.
- The second icon shows the type of tool. The following options are available:
  - » Exercise (a tool that describes an activity that is done once, during a session)
  - » Assessment (a tool that aims to assess a trait or characteristic of a person)
  - » Overview (a tool that provides an overview or list of something; research findings, facts, etc.)
  - » Advice (a tool that is directed at the helping professional providing advice on how to carry out a certain activity)
  - » Meditation (a tool that describes a form of meditation)
  - » Intervention (a tool that describes an activity that needs to be done more than once during a certain period)
- The third icon provides an estimation of the duration of the tool. In other words, how long it takes to complete the exercise. This is always an estimation of the total time it takes. Note that for some tool types, like overview, advice, protocol and intervention it is difficult if not impossible to provide an estimation of the duration. In these cases n/a (not available) is written.
- The fourth icon describes the intended audience for this tool; available options include client, coach or group.
- The last icon indicates whether this specific tool has been tested at least once in a scientific study and has been published in a peer reviewed journal (yes or no). Note that if there is a strong theoretical and scientifically tested basis underlying the tool, but the tool itself in its current form has not been directly addressed in research, the icon will still indicate “no”.

**Important note**

Please note that the tools in this give-away are not a substitute for a clinical or coaching certification program, which we recommend you take before you call yourself an official “therapist” or “coach” and before you see clients or patients.

Note that you are advised to use these tools within the boundaries of your professional expertise. For instance, if you are a certified clinician, you are advised to use the exercises within your field of expertise (e.g. clinical psychology). Likewise, a school teacher may use the exercises in the classroom, but is not advised to use the exercises for clinical populations. PositivePsychology.com B.V. is not responsible for unauthorized usage of these tools.

## Applying the Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion

### Compassion

Meditation

10 min.

Client

No

Self-compassion can be considered to have two parts: the feminine and the masculine. In traditional Chinese philosophy, this duality is represented by yin and yang (Neff & Germer, 2018). The three core components of self-compassion according to Neff's theoretical model (Neff, 2016) are self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness of suffering. In terms of yin self-compassion, self-kindness involves soothing and comforting oneself when suffering, common humanity involves recognizing that pain is an inevitable part of being human, and mindfulness involves being aware of and open to one's pain and suffering in the moment. Approaching pain and suffering in this yin way allows one to begin to transform and heal. An example of yin self-compassion for a woman who is experiencing burnout at work would be drawing a hot bath and playing relaxing music at the end of the working day.

In yang self-compassion, also known as fierce self-compassion, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness manifest as stepping up and protecting oneself, standing with others who have experienced similar disharmony, and in clearly seeing the truth. In this way, yang self-compassion shows up as fierce, inner strength (Neff & Germer, 2018). An example of yang self-compassion for the woman experiencing burnout at work would be speaking up to her boss about taking some time off or cutting down her current workload. Whereas many existing self-compassion therapeutic exercises help clients enact yin self-compassion, this tool helps clients explore and develop both yin and yang self-compassion.



### Author

This tool was adapted from the Mindful Self-compassion Workbook by Kristin Neff and Chris Germer (2018) by Hugo Alberts (PhD) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



### Goal

This tool helps clients develop the yang side of self-compassion (also known as fierce self-compassion).



## Advice

- Clients may benefit from further clarification on the difference between yin and yang self-compassion. In these cases, offer clients the following advice. First, while self-compassionate care sometimes takes the form of validating and gently leaning in to painful emotions (yin), sometimes it involves a stern “no!” and turning away from danger (yang). Second, while self-compassion sometimes involves letting our bodies know everything is okay with warmth and tenderness (yin), sometimes it means figuring out what we need and ensuring we meet those needs (yang). Third, whereas sometimes self-compassion requires being willingly open to what is (yin), other times it means we need to step up and make a change (yang).
- This exercise may be particularly beneficial for male clients who associate self-compassion with being soft and/or weak. This exercise aims to offer a balanced view of self-compassion, which encompasses strong, protective actions toward oneself as well as the more traditional and well-known nurturing, soothing actions toward the self.



## Suggested Readings

Neff, K., & Germer, C. (2018). *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook: A Proven Way to Accept Yourself, Build Inner Strength, and Thrive*. New York: Guilford Publications.

Neff, K. (2016). Self-compassion. *Mindfulness in Positive Psychology: The Science of Meditation and Wellbeing*, 37, 1-8.

## Tool description

### Instructions

#### *Introduce the exercise*

There are lots of ways to be compassionate towards yourself during times of need. You can comfort yourself, soothe yourself, and offer yourself validation, and you can protect yourself, provide for yourself, and motivate yourself. The comforting, soothing, validating side of self-compassion is known as *yin* self-compassion. This is the “feminine” side of self-compassion, where the focus is on being with ourselves.

In contrast, *yang* self-compassion is the protective, providing, motivating side of self-compassion. This is the “masculine” side of self-compassion, where the focus is on acting in the world (see fig. 1).

Fig 1. *Self-compassion can be thought of as having two sides: the nurturing, comforting, and soothing side (also known as the “yin” side), and the protective, providing, motivating side (also known as the “yang” side).*



Take, for example, a person who is experiencing burnout at work. This person might engage in *yin* self-compassion by running themselves a hot bath and playing relaxing music at the end of a long day. Alternatively, or additionally, this person might engage in *yang* self-compassion by speaking to work about cutting down his or her current workload. In this exercise, we are going to explore these different aspects of self-compassion.

In this exercise, we are going to tap into the “yang” side of self-compassion.





### Step 1: Choose a difficult life situation

Recall a situation that you are having difficulty with at the moment. For example, you may be experiencing stress at work, or you may have had an argument with a family member. Describe this situation in the space below:

### Step 2: Yin self-compassion actions

Regarding your current difficult situation (identified in Step 1), come up with at least one self-compassion actions for each of the three aspects of yin self-compassion in the first column of the table displayed in the appendix. Write your answers in the action columns.

Comforting: What is one thing that you can do to take care of your emotional needs?

Soothing: What is one thing that you can do to make yourself feel physically calmer and more at ease?



Validating: What is one thing that can you say to yourself to validate your feelings?

### Step 3: Yang self-compassion actions

Regarding your current difficult situation (identified in Step 1), come up with at least one self-compassion actions for each of the three aspects of yang self-compassion in the second column of the table shown in the appendix. Write your answers in the action columns.

Protecting: What is one thing that can do to stop others that are hurting you or stop the harm that you are inflicting on yourself?

Providing: What is one thing that you can do to give yourself what you need?


Motivating: How can you motivate yourself with kindness, support, and understanding, rather than criticism?

**Appendix: Yin/Yang self-compassion actions table**


Yin Self-Compassion		Yang Self-Compassion	
aspect	action	aspect	action
<p><b>Comforting</b> What can I do to take care of my emotional needs?</p>		<p><b>Protecting</b> What can I do stop others that are hurting me or stop the harm I inflict on myself?</p>	
<p><b>Soothing</b> What can I do to make myself feel physically calmer?</p>		<p><b>Providing</b> What can I do to give myself what I need?</p>	
<p><b>Validating</b> What can I say to myself to validate my own feelings?</p>		<p><b>Motivating</b> How can I motivate myself with kindness, support, and understanding, rather than criticism?</p>	

## Self-Care Vision Board

### Compassion

 Exercise

 60 min.

 Client or group

 No

Self-care activities are those things we do to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health. Countless research findings demonstrate the importance of one's ability to attend to and meet personal needs. For instance, self-care has been found to increase empathy, immunologic functioning, and has been associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008).

Self-care is sometimes mistaken for selfishness, however, according to Mills, Wand, and Fraser (2015), self-care allows people to take better care of others. These authors argue that it is a lack of self-care during times of distress that has a negative effect on one's ability to provide care and compassion to others. Because self-care ensures that we have taken care of our needs, we operate from a state of inner balance, which renders us better equipped to meet others' needs.

While self-care may sound simple enough, it is often difficult to execute. One of the most common reasons for people not engaging in regular self-care is that they "don't have time". Fortunately, there are many different self-care practices one can do, and none of them are especially time-consuming or require a lot of planning. Once self-care becomes a part of everyday life, it is likely that people will become more and more protective of that time and wonder how they ever managed without it.

Doing kind and caring things for ourselves, particularly when we are struggling, can help us to cope and move through difficult emotional experiences. Self-care activities can be sensory, emotional, physical, spiritual, and social. The idea with initiating self-care and integrating it into everyday life is to find out what feels good to you—something that you genuinely enjoy doing, and that fits with your lifestyle and your values.

This exercise involves creating a self-care vision board. A vision board is a visual representation of a particular concept using images, illustrations and/or words. The aim of the exercise is to help clients increase self-care and self-compassion in a creative way.



### Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (PhD).



## Goal

This tool aims to help clients increase self-care and self-compassion in a creative way. It involves a playful and intuitive search for potential self-care activities that, when completed, can serve as a visual reminder and motivator.



## Advice

- Some practical advice for clients includes: Use pen and paper to make drawings; Use scissors to cut pictures and texts from hardcopy magazines and glue them together on a piece of paper; Use apps, like Bloom (<http://appcrawlr.com/ios/bloom-2>) or Corkulous Pro (<http://appcrawlr.com/ios/corkulous-pro>); Use Powerpoint or Keynote to build a presentation with images, photos, and text.
- Exposure to the vision board can serve as a prime or reminder. Therefore, suggest to your client to place the vision board in a visible spot (e.g., on the refrigerator or office desk). Note that some clients may consider their board a private source of inspiration. If this is the case, they should think of a place that limits who can view their work. The point is that your client's vision board should be accessible to him/her, and should not be placed where he/ she will fall out of the habit of looking at it.
- When creating the vision board, it is important to enjoy the process and work intuitively. Rather than creating the vision board in a rational mode (a lot of thinking and internally debating), it often works best to just go with the flow: select images or texts that feel good or appropriate, without overthinking it. Prioritizing can always be done afterward.
- After clients have created their vision boards, ask them if they would like to discuss the vision board together in a session. Allowing clients to share their vision boards with the practitioner can not only enhance the therapeutic alliance but can also create a fruitful starting point for behavioural change. Questions that can be discussed during this reflection include: Can you explain to me what we are looking at? How was it to create this board? What did you experience while making it? What did you learn from this exercise? What kind of goals can be formulated based on your vision board? Which self-care activity would you like to initiate first?
- Although this exercise may be done at the very beginning of an intervention, it may also be valuable to do it at the end of an intervention because self-care continues to enhance wellbeing once the intervention is over. In this way, the vision board can serve as a reminder for staying on course or as a buffer against relapse.



## Suggested Readings

Schure, M. B., Christopher, J., & Christopher, S. (2008). Mind-body medicine and the art of self-care: teaching mindfulness to counseling students through yoga, meditation, and qigong. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*, 47-56.

Mills, J., Wand, T., & Fraser, J. A. (2015). On self-compassion and self-care in nursing: Selfish or essential for compassionate care?. *International journal of nursing studies, 52*, 791-793.

# Self-Care Vision Board

## Instructions

This exercise involves creating a self-care vision board. A vision board is a visual representation of a particular concept using images, illustrations and/or words. Thus, a self-care vision board is a collection of images and words that reflect ideas for self-care. Self-care activities are those things we do to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health. Follow the following three steps to create your self-care vision board.

### Step 1: Brainstorm self-care activities

Come up with a list of as many potential self-care activities as possible. Be bold and creative, allowing yourself to consider new and different potential activities. Only include activities that you would genuinely enjoy doing and that fit with your lifestyle and your values. Refer to Appendix A for inspiration.

### Step 2: Collect images for your vision board

Find positive images that correspond with your chosen self-care activities. Look for images that resonate with you, and inspire you. You might like to use the internet, magazines, and photographs as potential sources. Use photos of activities that you can do to take better care of yourself and your needs.

### Step 3: Collect words for your vision board

You can decide to keep your vision board completely visual or to add words and phrases to it. The words and phrases you choose should reflect or relate to your chosen self-care activities. You might like to cut words out of magazines or print them from the internet. Choose words and fonts that resonate with you and inspire you.

### Step 4: Put your vision board together

Once you have gathered your images and inspiring phrases, get creative with your arrangement.



## Appendix A. Examples of self-care activities

### Emotional self-Care

- Learn to say “no.”
- Intentionally schedule “me time” on your calendar or planner.
- Reward yourself for completing small tasks.
- Use online tutorials to learn something new.
- Develop a relaxing evening ritual.
- Allow yourself to feel and express all of your feelings (in a safe and appropriate environment).
- Try some mindful exercises to help bring you into the present moment.
- Try some adult coloring as a form of anxiety and/or stress release.
- Remind yourself of the good stuff in life by writing a list of things you’re grateful to have.
- Take a moment to allow your feelings to be present without judging them.
- Stop being your harshest critic. Allow yourself to make mistakes.

### Physical Self-care

- Do some stretching exercises.
- Take a walk.
- Drink more water.
- Exhaust yourself physically. Do whatever helps you feel fatigued.
- Get a massage.
- Go out and spend 10 minutes under the sun.
- Go for a bike ride to nowhere in particular.
- Go hiking, camping, or backpacking and spend some time in nature.
- Go to bed early.

### Social self-care

- Avoid toxic people.
- Ask for help. Let people know you need some help.
- Call a trusted friend or family member and talk things out.
- Choose who you spend your time with today. Spend time with people who are enthusiastic and positive.
- Intentionally reconnect with someone you’ve lost touch with or have unresolved conflict with.
- Join a support group for people who are going through what you’re going through
- Schedule a regular date night with your significant other.
- Take a road trip with your siblings.







## Spiritual self-care

- Make time for meditation in your day.
- Do a 10-minute body scan technique to check in with each part of your body.
- Do something nice for someone in secret.
- Donate money to a charity of your choosing.
- Help someone in some way.
- Find an opportunity to use your strengths, the things that energize you, more often.

## Learning to Rate Behaviour Rather Than The Self

### Self-acceptance

 Exercise

 15 min.

 Client

 No

Self-acceptance refers to the relationship an individual has with himself, and is conceptualized as the acceptance of self despite weaknesses or deficiencies. Some scholars have added the term “unconditional” to the concept to emphasize the fact that self-acceptance is not based on self-evaluation against some standard, but a relational stance in which the individual accepts himself at a very fundamental level (Ellis, 1977), regardless of whether certain expectations or standards are met. Unconditional self-acceptance means that “the individual fully and unconditionally accepts himself whether or not he behaves intelligently, correctly, or competently and whether or not other people approve, respect, or love him” (Ellis, 1977, p. 101). A person with high self-acceptance does not feel “less” than others because of his weaknesses and failures and does not feel “better” than others because of his strengths and successes. Self-acceptance is the hallmark of a healthy relationship with the self.

Note that self-acceptance does not mean that the individual refrains from evaluating his behaviour. The individual does reflect on his behaviour and is willing and motivated to make changes and improve the behaviour, but the evaluation of the behaviour is detached from an evaluation of the self. When confronted with personal shortcomings, the individual evaluates his actions and still experiences sadness, disappointment or loss. Importantly, however, the self as a whole is not devalued. This individual realizes that he:

- is not a bad person when he acts badly; He is a person who has acted badly
- has faults and can work on correcting them without blaming, condemning, or damning himself for having them
- can identify weaknesses without defining himself by them

The reason the self as a whole is not devalued is that the individual experiences himself on a fundamental level as worthy of esteem and love. This individual knows and feels deeply that he is “enough”, and that a mistake or shortcoming does not mean that he is not worthy of love. In this exercise, clients explore the difference between rating the self and rating behaviour.



### Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (PhD).



## Goal

This tool aims to help clients differentiate between rating the self and rating behaviour with regards to past mistakes and regrettable actions.



## Advice

- This exercise can also be used as homework. For instance, at the end of the day, clients may reflect on the mistakes or regrettable actions of the day and practice evaluating their actions rather than their whole self.
- After completing this exercise, clients may practice at home with increasing daily awareness of self-evaluation. The practitioner may instruct clients to notice self-evaluation, pause and then replace the self-evaluation with an evaluation of the behaviour only. Over time, this may be a powerful way for clients to relate differently to their mistakes.



## Suggested Readings

Ellis, A. (1995). Rational emotive behavior therapy. *Current psychotherapies*, 5, 162-196.

Ellis, A. (1977). Rational-emotive therapy: Research data that supports the clinical and personality hypotheses of RET and other modes of cognitive-behavior therapy. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 7(1), 2-42.



## Tool description

### Instructions

We all make mistakes, and we all do things that we are not proud of from time to time. However, the way in which people evaluate their mistakes or regrettable actions can differ. While some people may see such actions as proof of being a “flawed” or “unworthy” human being, others may see them as inevitable occurrences that are merely a part of being human. In this exercise, you will explore these two ways of evaluating mistakes or regrettable actions.

#### Step 1: Identify past mistakes

Make a list of 5-10 things in your past that you are not proud of or that you wish you did differently. For example, you may have forgotten a close friend’s birthday, or said something unkind to someone, or became overly angry at some driver, or made a mistake, or treated someone unfairly. List each of these past regrets in the first column in the table below.

#### Step 2: Evaluate yourself as a person

For each of the actions listed in the first column, evaluate yourself as a person for making the mistake. What personal characteristics could explain the mistake? Write down this global evaluation of yourself in the second column.

### Step 3: Evaluate your behaviour

Now, in the third column, evaluate your behaviour with regards to the mistake. What actions or behaviours could explain the mistake?

Past mistake or regrettable action	Evaluation of the self	Evaluation of behaviour
I forgot my friend's birthday	I am a lousy friend; I am careless	Forgetting the birthday was not very thoughtful of me

### Step 4: Reflection

- How was it to do this exercise?
- Do you feel differently about yourself when you consider your responses in the second column versus the third column? If so, how?
- Which responses (second or third column) are more motivating in terms of improving yourself to do better next time?
- Going forward, will you aim to evaluate yourself or your behaviour with regards to mistakes or regrettable behaviour? Why?