You just missed a big deadline. You got flustered during a presentation. You made a bad call with a client. Do you respond by berating yourself, spending a sleepless night reliving the experience? Or do you give yourself a little empathy and support and move on?

How you answer those questions can have important ramifications that go far beyond your emotional well-being. A burgeoning literature reveals that treating yourself as compassionately as you would treat a friend can also benefit your physical health, your relationships, even your ability to learn. What’s more, self-forgiveness and self-compassion are qualities that can be learned, say psychologists.

What’s behind the growing interest? “People are realizing that of course it would be helpful to have an inner friend rather than an inner enemy,” says psychologist Kristin Neff, PhD, author of the 2015 book “Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself.”

Self-forgiveness and self-compassion are overlapping but distinct constructs. Self-forgiveness is a coping strategy that involves repairing damage done to your idea of yourself to resolve guilt, shame, disappointment and other emotions that arise when you see a discrepancy between what you believe in and something you’ve done, says Don E. Davis, PhD, an assistant professor of counseling and psychological services at Georgia State University (Journal of Counseling Psychology, 2015).

Self-compassion goes beyond just forgiving yourself when you’ve made a mistake, says Neff, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. Self-compassion, she says, can be applied to any situation of emotional distress.

According to Neff, whose definition has become a kind of gold standard for researchers, self-compassion has three key elements:

- **Self-kindness.** Instead of berating themselves after a failure or jumping straight into what Neff calls “fix it” mode when a hardship arises, self-compassionate people acknowledge the inevitability of imperfection in themselves and in their lives and are caring and gentle with themselves.
- **Common humanity.** People often feel isolated when things don’t go the way they want. Instead of feeling as if they are the only people who face setbacks, self-compassionate people recognize imperfections as part of the shared human experience.
- **Mindfulness.** People often respond to negative emotions by either exaggerating them or trying to suppress them, says Neff. In contrast, self-compassionate people simply observe their thoughts and feelings without judgment.

Some people claim that self-compassion is selfish. Others worry that being easy on themselves will undermine their motivation to do better next time. Not so, says psychologist Fuschia M. Sirois, PhD, a reader in social and health psychology at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, who became interested in researching self-compassion after meeting Neff at an APA convention. “That’s not how self-compassion works,” says Sirois. “Self-compassion is about alleviating negative feelings.” There’s nothing about self-compassion that’s going to motivate you to put yourself through the whole negative cycle again, she says.

Learning self-compassion can be as easy as thinking about how you would respond to a friend who was going through the same situation you are, says Neff. But you can also try the many guided meditations and self-compassion exercises on her website at www.self-compassion.org. A randomized controlled trial by Neff and Christopher...
CE Corner

K. Gieger, PhD, found that such training can help. Participants in an eight-week self-compassion workshop reported significantly larger increases in well-being, self-compassion and mindfulness than those in a control group put on a waiting list. The results were lasting, too, with gains maintained at six-month and one-year follow-ups (Journal of Clinical Psychology, 2013).

HEALTH BENEFITS

Other research shows the specific ways being less hard on yourself can help you.

A review of the literature by Davis and colleagues, for example, found that self-forgiveness is associated with both mental and physical health. In a meta-analysis of studies involving almost 18,000 participants, the researchers found a robust correlation between self-forgiveness and psychological well-being. A second meta-analysis of studies involving 5,600 participants revealed that self-forgiveness predicts physical health outcomes, too. Noting that the studies they reviewed relied mostly on self-reported physical health outcomes, Davis and his co-authors called for more rigorous methodologies and research to clarify both the magnitude and mechanisms of the relationship (Journal of Counseling Psychology, 2015).

That kind of research is already starting to happen. Fuschia Sirois, for example, has examined how self-compassion prompts health-promoting behaviors, such as healthy eating, exercise, adequate sleep and effective stress management.

In a meta-analysis of their own data on more than 3,000 individuals, Sirois and co-authors found a positive association between self-compassion and the practice of such health-promoting behaviors (Health Psychology, 2015). People who don’t follow through on their healthy-living intentions, by skipping the gym or devouring a piece of cheesecake, often beat up on themselves, says Sirois. “For them, it’s all or nothing,” she says. “They think, ‘I just screwed up, so I’m going to quit my diet’.” Self-compassionate individuals, on the other hand, accept that they made a mistake, vow to try harder next time and simply move on.

A better student? Self-compassion could also help you do better in school, says Sirois. Take procrastination, an all-too-common problem in grade school and beyond. Traditionally, researchers have thought of procrastination as the result of poor time management. But, says Sirois, these cognitive approaches don’t do enough of an over-emphasis on short-term rewards, such as goofing off versus long-term goals, such as finishing a paper. But, says Sirois, these cognitive approaches don’t capture what’s really going on.

In another study, Sirois found that procrastination was associated with lower levels of self-compassion and higher levels of stress. Although it may look from the outside like students are slacking off by scrolling through Facebook rather than studying, what’s really going on in their minds could be turmoil, she says. Procrastination can be a way to cope with an unpleasant, intimidating task, she says, and those negative emotions can intensify as students start criticizing themselves for disengaging from that task (Self and Identity, 2014).

“But students have to recognize that being harder on yourself is not going to make you get on with the task. It’s going to make you avoid it more,” says Sirois. “Self-compassion can reduce the threshold of negative emotions so that the task is more approachable.”

The role of guilt

Making mistakes—with a client, for example—can also prompt harsh self-criticism. And when that happens, the resulting shame and guilt can keep you from learning, warns psychologist Jeffrey L. Goodie, PhD, director of clinical training at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland. He and William E. Byrum IV, MD, reviewed the literature and found that feeling shame after a mistake was associated with impaired self-forgiveness, negative coping mechanisms and decreased empathy (Medical Education, 2014).

Instead of learning from the mistake, says Goodie, you may just want to escape from the person you made the mistake with or the situation itself. Say a client storms out when asked about his or her sexual history. Shame and guilt could cause that psychologist or trainer to simply stop asking such questions. “You may be less likely to approach those types of situations again instead of being willing to forgive yourself and being able to learn,” says Goodie.

Learning self-compassion can be especially important for those in clinical or counseling careers, says Marina Dorian, PhD, an associate professor of clinical psychology at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama.

Many people find it hard to let go after they’ve hurt someone, whether it was cheating on a partner, making a mistake with a client, or inadvertently taking on the amount of responsibility for whatever it was they did wrong. A graduate student might miss a deadline for a class assignment and forgive him- or herself for doing so, but believe deep down that the real transgression was made by the professor who didn’t allow enough time for the assignment. “The student isn’t taking on the amount of responsibility he or she should,” says Wohl.

Another potential pitfall? Forgive yourself prematurely. Say you’re a smoker who is trying to quit and you keep forgiving yourself for slipping up. “What that allows you to do is let go of the negative feelings you have toward yourself for smoking, which can promote the behavioral status quo—continued smoking,” says Wohl.

True self-forgiveness should be a process that you engage in after you’ve stopped engaging in the ongoing negative behavior, he says. “It’s potentially counter-productive to forgive yourself before you’ve stopped it.”

ABOUT CE

CE Corner is a continuing education article offered by the APA Office of CE in Psychology. To earn CE credits after you read this article, purchase the online exam at www.apa.org/ce/1360415.aspx. Upon successful completion of the test—a score of 75 percent or higher—you can immediately print your CE certificate.

The test fee is $20 for members and $35 for nonmembers. The APA Office of CE in Psychology retains responsibility for the program. For more information, call (800) 374-2727.

Learning self-compassion can be especially important for those in clinical or counseling careers, says Marina Dorian, PhD, an associate professor of clinical psychology at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama.

Many people find it hard to let go after they’ve hurt someone, whether it was cheating on a partner, making a mistake with a client, or inadvertently taking on the amount of responsibility for whatever it was they did wrong. A graduate student might miss a deadline for a class assignment and forgive him- or herself for doing so, but believe deep down that the real transgression was made by the professor who didn’t allow enough time for the assignment. “The student isn’t taking on the amount of responsibility he or she should,” says Wohl.

Another potential pitfall? Forgive yourself prematurely. Say you’re a smoker who is trying to quit and you keep forgiving yourself for slipping up. “What that allows you to do is let go of the negative feelings you have toward yourself for smoking, which can promote the behavioral status quo—continued smoking,” says Wohl.

True self-forgiveness should be a process that you engage in after you’ve stopped engaging in the ongoing negative behavior, he says. “It’s potentially counter-productive to forgive yourself before you’ve stopped it.”

any harm you have caused. Then acknowledge your regret without lapsing into shame. Next is resto- ration, in which you strive to repair the damage you have caused and recommit to your values. The final step is renewal, moving on with a renewed sense of self-trust and self-acceptance.

Research suggests the inter- vention works. After controlling for differences in screening scores, Comish and Iowa State psychol- ogy professor Nathaniel G. Wade, PhD, found that participants who went through the intervention had significantly lower self-condemnation and psychological distress and significantly higher self- forgiveness than those randomly assigned to a wait list (Journal of Counseling Psychology, 2015).

Doing it right

All that said, you shouldn’t forgive yourself too easily, says J.A. Wohl, PhD, a psychology professor at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Self-forgiveness can be a way to let yourself off the hook, says Wohl, who has written about “the good, the bad and the ugly” of self-forgiveness (“I Feel Bad and Personality Psychology Compass,” 2014). For example, some people engage in what Wohl calls “pseudo self-forgiveness,” forgiving themselves for wrongdoing without really taking responsi- bility for whatever it was they did wrong. A graduate student might miss a deadline for a class assignment and forgive him- or herself for doing so, but believe deep down that the real transgression was made by the professor who didn’t allow enough time for the assignment. “The student isn’t taking on the amount of responsibility he or she should,” says Wohl.

Another potential pitfall? Forgive yourself prematurely. Say you’re a smoker who is trying to quit and you keep forgiving yourself for slipping up. “What that allows you to do is let go of the negative feelings you have toward yourself for smoking, which can promote the behavioral status quo—continued smoking,” says Wohl.

True self-forgiveness should be a process that you engage in after you’ve stopped engaging in the ongoing negative behavior, he says. “It’s potentially counter- productive to forgive yourself before you’ve stopped it.”

To directly access the citations in this article, go to our digital edition at www.apa.org/monitor/digital.