

9 Ways to Practice Self-Compassion When You Have Depression

By [Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.](#)

Associate Editor

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When you're struggling with depression, the last thing you want to do is be self-compassionate. But this is precisely what can help. Self-compassion is “the capacity to find the wisdom and dignity in one’s experience (particularly suffering), and to respond to it in an appropriately kind way,” according to Lea Seigen Shinraku, MFT, a therapist in private practice in San Francisco.

She believes all of us have this capacity. However, a depressed state of mind tends to impede access to it. That’s because “people who suffer with depression often have a core belief that there is something wrong with them; that they don’t deserve to be happy; that the world is a dark place; and/or that there’s no point in doing anything,” Shinraku said.

But you can still connect to your innate capacity. The key lies in practice.

“Don’t wait to feel motivated or believe that you ‘deserve’ self-compassion,” said [Josephine Wiseheart](#), MS, a psychotherapist at Oliver-Pyatt Centers, and in private practice in Miami, Fla. She doesn’t expect her clients to have a shift in self-worth and believe they suddenly deserve to be treated with kindness and understanding. Instead, she hopes that once they start practicing self-compassion, a shift will occur.

Here are nine tips for practicing self-compassion.

1. Start small.

“Simple acts of self-care can demonstrate that sense of kindness and nurturance to one’s self,” said [Karin Lawson](#), PsyD, a psychologist and clinical director of Embrace, the binge eating recovery program at Oliver-Pyatt Centers. This might be anything from taking a shower to getting a massage to nourishing yourself with food to taking a leisurely walk, she said.

You also might try self-compassionate gestures. Take a deep breath, put your hand on your heart and let it rest there, she said. Or “cup your face with your hands with a sense of gentleness. This safe physical touch can actually activate the parasympathetic nervous system and release neurotransmitters to help us...shift into a more compassionate headspace.”

2. Bring awareness to your experience without judgment.

According to [Shinraku](#), by simply telling yourself, “I’m really having a hard time” or “I don’t know how to do this alone,” you can start to dis-identify from your depression. You can start to see depression as something you’re experiencing rather than who you are, she said.

Shinraku shared these other examples: “I feel powerless; I wish I could see things differently.” “I don’t know how to accept myself as I am right now.”

3. Get curious.

When you’re struggling with depression, one of the hardest parts of self-compassion is relating to yourself with kindness, Shinraku said. If kindness feels too hard, or inauthentic, get curious instead. Because curiosity is “a potent form of kindness.”

For instance, get curious by journaling about these prompts, she said:

- “Even though my depression/inner critic seems to know, with absolute certainty, what’s happening right now, is it possible that I might not have the full story?”
- “If a friend was struggling the way I am, what might I say to her or him? What would I want that friend to know?”

4. Interrupt rumination by refocusing.

Instead of replaying the past or worrying about what might or might not happen, Shinraku suggested bringing attention to your breath or physical sensations. For instance, you can “count 10 inhales and 10 exhales.”

You also can do a body scan. Start with your toes, and notice the sensations present in your body, Shinraku said. “If you find areas of tension, imagine you are sending your breath to those areas as you exhale.”

5. Explore exceptions.

Your inner critic may like to speak in absolutes, such as “always” or “never.” When you hear such statements, seek out the exception, Wiseheart said. “Even if we have ‘failed’ or ‘disappointed,’ it does not mean that we always fail or disappoint. And it certainly does not mean that we are a failure or disappointment. No one can always or never do anything.”

6. Focus on self-compassionate statements.

Wiseheart suggested this exercise for practicing compassionate self-talk. Create two columns: On the left side of the paper, vent your negative, self-loathing statements. Then read each statement as if your child or loved one is reading them to you. Write a self-compassionate response to each negative statement.

7. Write a letter.

Lawson shared this exercise: Imagine your loved one is struggling with the same depressive thoughts. Write a letter to this person. “What would you say to him or her? What compassion, love and tenderness might you offer?” Then address the letter to yourself. Read it aloud.

8. Remember you’re not alone.

Another big part of self-compassion is common humanity or interconnectedness (per Kristin Neff’s [definition](#)). You can connect to this by remembering you’re not alone, Shinraku said. In this very moment millions of people, all over the world, are struggling with depression.

[Prominent individuals](#) throughout history, including Abraham Lincoln, Georgia O’Keefe and Sigmund Freud, struggled, too, she said. Many [famous people](#) struggle today. Depression doesn’t discriminate.

According to Lawson, recognizing that everyone struggles may remind you that you don’t deserve self-criticism and harshness. As Shinraku added, “Depression doesn’t mean you are defective; it means that you are human.”

9. Practice loving-kindness meditation.

According to Lawson, “A loving-kindness meditation focuses on thinking loving and kind thoughts for those around you and includes yourself.” She recommended this [meditation](#) from psychologist Tara Brach and this [meditation](#) from psychologist Kristin Neff.

Seeking out resources to help with your depression is self-compassionate, too, Shinraku said. “If you feel depressed, and you are reading this article, you are already practicing self-compassion.”

[Hands on heart photo](#) available from Shutterstock