

Self-Compassion May be More Important Than Self-Esteem in Dealing With Negative Events, New Studies Show

Why do some people roll with life's punches, facing failures and problems with grace, while others dwell on calamities, criticize themselves and exaggerate problems?

The answer, according to researchers from Duke and Wake Forest universities, may be self-compassion -- the ability to treat oneself kindly when things go badly. The results of their research, one of the first major investigations of self-compassion, were published in the May 2007 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"Life's tough enough with little things that happen. Self-compassion helps to eliminate a lot of the anger, depression and pain we experience when things go badly for us," said Mark R. Leary, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke and lead author of the paper, which includes five peer-reviewed studies.

The other authors are Eleanor B. Tate and Ashley Batts Allen of Duke; Jessica Hancock of Wake Forest University; and Claire E. Adams, formerly of Wake Forest University and now of Louisiana State University.

"Rather than focusing on changing people's self-evaluations, as many cognitive-behavioral approaches do, self-compassion changes people's relationship to their self-evaluations," Leary said. "Self-compassion helps people not to add a layer of self-recrimination on top of whatever bad things happen to them. If people learn only to feel better about themselves but continue to beat themselves up when they fail or make mistakes, they will be unable to cope nondefensively with their difficulties."

Self-compassion involves three components. They are self-kindness (being kind and understanding toward oneself rather than self-critical); common humanity (viewing one's negative experiences as a normal part of the human condition); and mindful acceptance (having mindful equanimity rather than over-identifying with painful thoughts and feelings).

Self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Inventory, the most widely used measure of self-esteem.

The researchers conducted five studies to investigate the cognitive and emotional processes by which self-compassionate people deal with unpleasant life events.

The experiments involved measuring participants' reactions to recalling actual negative experiences, imagining negative scenarios, receiving unflattering feedback from another person, comparing their evaluations of themselves doing a task and someone else doing the same task, and measuring reactions of participants who were prompted to have a self-compassionate attitude.

In three of the experiments, researchers also compared reactions of people with differing levels of self-compassion to people with differing levels of self-esteem. The findings suggest that fostering a sense of self-compassion may have particularly beneficial effects for people with low self-esteem, the researchers said.

The researchers found that:

-- People with higher self-compassion had less negative emotional reactions to real, remembered and imagined bad events.

-- Self-compassion allowed people to accept responsibility for a negative experience, but to counteract bad feelings about it.

-- Self-compassion protects people from negative events differently -- and in some cases better -- than self-esteem. In addition, the positive feelings that characterize self-compassionate people do not appear to involve the hubris, narcissism or self-enhancing illusions that characterize many people with high self-esteem.

-- Being self-compassionate is particularly important for people with low self-esteem. People with low self-esteem who treat themselves kindly in spite of unflattering self-evaluations fare as well as, if not better than, those with high self-esteem.

-- For self-compassionate people, their view of themselves depends less on the outcomes of events, presumably because they respond in a kind and accepting manner toward themselves whether things go well or badly.

The study also notes that many of the positive benefits typically attributed to high self-esteem may, in fact, be due to self-compassion.

“As you disentangle them, self-compassion seems to be more important than self-esteem, and is in fact responsible for some of the positive effects of self-esteem,” Leary said.

Researchers noted some questions raised by their research. It is unclear from the studies whether self-compassionate people are simply less likely to examine themselves deeply, or whether they maintain a more positive view of themselves in spite of their shortcomings, the paper said.

It also does not examine whether self-compassion might have drawbacks. Although these studies indicate that people with high self-compassion are willing to take responsibility for their actions, it is possible that self-compassion may make people complacent and discourage them from taking action to prevent future mistakes, researchers said.

In addition, four of the five studies looked at fairly mild negative events in an experimental setting, and future research should examine how self-compassionate people respond to more serious, real-life events, the study said.

“American society has spent a great deal of time and effort trying to promote people’s self-esteem,” Leary said, “when a far more important ingredient of well-being may be self-compassion.”

Source: Duke University

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