

# WELL-BEING WEEK IN LAW

## SELF-COMPASSION ACTIVITY GUIDE



# WELL-BEING WEEK IN LAW

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**STAY STRONG**

Physical Well-Being

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**ALIGN**

Spiritual Well-Being

WEDS



**ENGAGE & GROW**

Career & Intellectual Well-Being

THURS



**CONNECT**

Social Well-Being

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**FEEL WELL**

Emotional Well-Being

**Activity Title:**

Cultivating Unconditional Self-Worth Through Self-Compassion

**Well-Being Dimension:**

Emotional Well-Being

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### Activity Objective:

To cultivate self-compassion and practice supportive self-talk in moments of struggle or suffering.

### Well-Being Connection (How/Why Does this Work?)

Most people recognize the importance of treating others with compassion, and yet many of us are reluctant to do the same for ourselves. While we believe our self-critical approach is helping us, research indicates that it is most likely doing more harm than good. On the other hand, practicing self-compassion has been shown to dramatically enhance emotional well-being and to produce manifold other benefits such as higher-quality relationships, increased grit and resilience, and healthier behavior habits.

#### WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION

Self-compassion refers to the practice of relating to yourself in a kind, supportive, and non-judgmental manner when you experience setbacks or hardships. It involves treating yourself like you would treat a dear friend in your shoes: noticing the suffering, empathizing, and offering compassion and understanding, rather than judging or berating yourself as many of us are inclined to do.

The term was coined by psychologist Dr. Kristen Neff, who breaks self-compassion into three key components:

- 1) **Mindfulness:** Simply noting your emotions and validating them rather than trying to suppress them or over-identifying with them.

Mindfulness is a critical first step to self-compassion because it is what enables us to recognize when we are suffering in the first place and then choose to respond with kindness.

- 2) **Common Humanity:** Recognizing that everyone makes mistakes, that literally no one is perfect, and that pain and failure are inevitable aspects of the shared human experience.

While this sounds obvious, it is amazing how often we forget this fact and fall into the trap of believing that everyone else has it all together and that there must be something uniquely wrong with us when we err or struggle.

- 3) **Self-Kindness:** Showing yourself kindness and understanding in instances of suffering or perceived inadequacy.

### Well-Being Connection (How/Why Does this Work?)

This involves soothing and comforting yourself when you're in pain – offering a kind ear and a supportive hug instead of further tearing yourself apart. It means allowing yourself to feel your pain and stopping to say: *This is really hard right now. What can I do to care for myself in this moment of suffering?*

#### SELF-COMPASSION VS. SELF-ESTEEM

Although self-compassion may seem similar to self-esteem, they are different in important ways. Self-esteem is based on our self-evaluation. It represents how much we like or value ourselves, often based on comparisons with others. Self-compassion, on the other hand, is unconditional. It is not based on positive judgments or evaluations, but rather on the belief that all human beings deserve compassion and understanding.

According to Dr. Neff “[s]elf-compassion gives you a stable self-worth, whereas self-esteem goes up and down depending on how your day is going. Your sense of self gets rocked every time you have a setback.”

#### WHY PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION?

Research shows that self-compassion is linked with reduced depression, increased happiness, increased life satisfaction, and better physical health. Dr. Neff explains, “There’s a mind-body connection. When you relate to yourself in a kind, connected, mindful stance, it reduces your cortisol levels and increases your heart rate variability. Physiologically it puts you in a healthier state, which translates into better physical health.”

#### DEBUNKING MYTHS ABOUT SELF-COMPASSION

*But wait, won't self-compassion make me lazy or complacent?* Actually, no. While some lawyers fear that embracing self-compassion will undermine their motivation or cause them to lose their edge, research shows that the opposite is true.

Contrary to popular belief, our inner critics are actually not effective motivators because they undermine our self-confidence and heighten our fear of failure. When we beat ourselves up over our mistakes, we ultimately learn that it's not safe to try again and avoid challenges and opportunities that would enable us to learn and grow. On the other hand, people who treat themselves with self-compassion have just as high personal standards, they just don't berate themselves when they fail, and are thus more willing to push themselves to broaden their capabilities and to try again when they don't succeed. Indeed, self-compassion has been shown to be linked with grit and growth mindset in academic settings, and increased motivation and follow-through with respect to health behaviors such as healthy eating, exercise, reduced drinking, and smoking cessation.

The research also shows that other myths about self-compassion are just that – myths:

- **Self-Compassion is not weak:** It requires great strength to take care of yourself. Studies indicate that people who practice self-compassion are more resilient in the face of adversity and better able to cope with challenging situations such as divorce, chronic pain, and trauma.
- **Self-Compassion is not self-pity:** The common humanity element of self-compassion enables us to see our suffering for what it is (an inevitable part of the human experience). Studies show that people who practice self-compassion are better able to take an objective stance on their situation and less likely to spend time ruminating.
- **Self-compassion is not selfish:** Even lawyers cannot pour from an empty cup. We must tend to our own needs if we want to support others. Research shows that people who practice self-compassion are less susceptible to burnout and rated as being substantially more caring to others.

### Procedure

#### CULTIVATING SELF-COMPASSION - LETTER FROM A FRIEND

This exercise is designed to help you begin building your self-compassion muscle.

**Step 1:** Reflect on something about yourself that causes you to feel shame, insecure, or less than.

**Step 2:** Imagine you have a friend who is unconditionally loving, accepting, and supportive of you. This friend can see all of your strengths and weaknesses, and loves and accepts you exactly as you are, with all of your human imperfections. Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this friend, focusing on the perceived inadequacy you reflected on in Step 1.

**Step 3:** After you complete your letter, set it aside for a little while. Then return to it and read it slowly, really letting the words sink in and allowing yourself to absorb the comfort and support they convey.

#### PRACTICING REAL-TIME SELF-COMPASSION

This exercise is designed to help you practice self-compassion in the moment by challenging and changing your critical self-talk. You can complete these steps either in your head or in writing.

**Step 1:** Acknowledge when you are being self-critical. Often, our inner critic becomes so ingrained that we don't realize when it's piping up. The goal of this first step is to mindfully observe your inner critic – taking note of the words it uses and the tone it conveys – so that you are able to separate yourself from it.

**Step 2:** Suggest a softer approach. Once you've acknowledged your inner critic, the next step is to soften its voice, but to do so with compassion rather than self-judgment. You might try something like: "Listen critic, I know you're scared of failing and that you just want me to succeed. But you're causing me so much pain and anxiety right now, and it's not helping. Can we please try a kinder approach?"

**Step 3:** Replace your inner critic's commentary with a kinder, more caring and compassionate response. If you're having trouble thinking of what words to use, try imagining what a friend who loves you unconditionally would say to you in this situation, or if it's easier, what you would say to them if they were in your shoes.

**Step 4:** Repeat. Chances are, when you first try this, it will feel forced and unnatural. That is completely normal. You will find that if you repeat this exercise over time, your self-compassionate voice will grow stronger and your inner critic's voice will weaken, ultimately transforming the way you relate to yourself over all.

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### Sources & Resources:

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### Author:

**Jordana Confino** is the founder of JC Coaching & Consulting, an organization that supports lawyers through individual coaching and partners with organizations to advance the well-being of the legal profession by building positive institutional cultures where all members feel valued, stimulated, and supported. She is the Assistant Dean of Professionalism and an adjunct professor at Fordham Law School, where she teaches courses on *Positive Lawyering and Peer Mentoring & Leadership*. Contact: [jordana@jordanaconfino.com](mailto:jordana@jordanaconfino.com)