I’ve noticed something lately. It’s something I see in my clients. Honestly, it’s something I see in myself. Women just can’t do self-compassion very well. Some may try. If I asked men what it means to be compassionate toward oneself, many wouldn’t even understand the question. This is the nature of our culture. Girls and women are raised to take of others and empathize with another’s pain. Men and boys are raised to hold in all feelings.

Of course, it’s not so simple, but it is hard for many people to truly love themselves. When it comes to being compassionate toward others, it’s a no-brainer. Turning toward oneself and treating “me” as gently and kindly as I would to a friend or child in need? That doesn’t happen much.

It’s radical.

Compassion is derived from the root word passion, which means to suffer. Compassion means to direct empathy toward another being. It is not pity. Compassion means recognizing the humanness of suffering and wanting to help ease it in some way.

Self-compassion simply means to direct compassion inward.

Thus, to understand what it truly means to be compassionate toward one’s self is nothing short of a miracle.

To step into one’s vulnerability in this way – with love and kindness toward self – is an act of courage.

So many of us are caught up in running around and “taking care of things” that we often become miserable in the process. Most parents are tired, worn out, or complaining how they can’t catch a break, and so on. It’s understandable. There’s a lot to take in and manage.

I know I’m a mom and a social entrepreneur. I never catch a break, either! I have to create the breaks – as an act of self-care.

I spend time with lots of other moms, too. I have these conversations every week with my clients or parents on the sideline of a soccer game or standing at the grocery checkout. Sometimes their complaints take my breath away when they talk. Literally.

I find myself holding my breath.

I know my reaction is an automatic primal threat response: I freeze.
Then I go into a deliberate act of deep breathing and I focus on my heart center. I imagine love and light emanating from me to them. I’ve come to understand that I’m simply registering and relating to their emotional state – usually that of fear or shame – and this requires an emotional reset. Of course, this reset is what other moms – and you – need to do, too:

* breathe deep
* relax into the tension
* expect the best, not the worst
* see the daily hassles as just hassles and let them go
* make room to let self-compassion in.

But that’s the tricky part: letting in kindness, a caring attitude toward oneself, and focusing on and feeling an inner warmth.

When I bring up the notion of self-compassion with other moms, I often get a blank stare. For some of my female clients, they get very uncomfortable or are cut off from the very notion when I describe it. They feel that self-compassion means they are being self-indulgent (which carries the belief that they don’t deserve to be cared for or aren’t worthy).

Self-compassion brings up vulnerability and fear. Kristin Neff, PhD, a pioneer in the study of self-compassion says there are three elements to self-compassion (described on the next page):

1. **Self-kindness**
2. **Sharing a common humanity**
3. **Mindfulness**

She offers a simple exercise of simply holding one’s hands over the heart and bringing to mind kindness and love – even imagining the warmth and sensations felt when holding an infant. And if that is too hard at first? You can simply have the intention to direct kindness to yourself.

And here’s the thing: research repeatedly confirms that people who are self-compassionate are less likely to be depressed, anxious or ill. They tend to be optimistic, playful, and authentic about their strengths and weaknesses. Self-compassionate people withhold self-judgment. They experience joy. As Brené Brown, PhD, an expert on shame and vulnerability, might say, they live and love wholeheartedly.

**“Moms, how can we possible be our best mom selves and role models for our children – foibles and all – if we don’t start with ourselves?”**

Tara Cousineau, PhD

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**The root of compassion is compassion for the self.**

Pema Chödrön
Health Benefits of self-compassion

The research is now unequivocal that self-compassion is important to wellbeing. Self-compassion is related to positive states, like happiness, life satisfaction, making healthy choices, and feeling connected to others.

When we are hard on ourselves – beyond an optimal level of stress – we are creating a state of wear and tear. Our bodies are in a constant state of high stress, which can lead to depression, irritability, and fatigue. Self-compassion, however, taps into the body’s self-soothing system. It fosters nurturing and inner calm. Instead of activating stress hormones, being kind and self-compassionate releases the feel-good hormones, like oxytocin.

“When we are self-critical we are both the attacker and the attacked.”

Kristen Neff, PhD

“Think about others first!” “Hard work pays off!”

Self-criticism actually undermines our ability to succeed because it triggers the body’s physiological threat system. In many ways we are wired to be vigilant and fearful; we are not wired to be happy or joyful!

The good news? When looking over a decade of study on the topic, the practice of self-compassion offers the benefits of self-esteem without the pitfalls of self-evaluation, social comparison and self-criticism. Self-compassion gives a sense of being valuable and being human, flaws and all. It’s not about “fake it until you make it.” Cultivating self-compassion is about developing authenticity.
Is it all in our heads?

Yes... and no. Paul Gilbert, PhD, an expert on the neuroscience of compassion, has been studying why it is difficult for some people to practice self-compassion. This seems especially true for those who have suffered childhood trauma or have come to believe they are not worthy of love, care, or attention. But it is also true for some many of us, trauma or not. (Who hasn’t suffered in some way over the course of life?)

Our brains are social learning machines. We take in what our environments put forth as well as the impression we create through these experiences. Women and girls are raised to care for others at the expense of their own needs; women are socialized to live up to unrealistic ideals: of beauty, body and motherhood. Sadly, self-compassion gets equated with selfishness. It’s as if we’ve forgotten that we also have basic human needs for nurturance and kindness.

Over time, neurological patterns get created that cause people to seek the negative, and this can lead to feeling depressed or anxious or even paranoid. It’s a cruel trick of the brain based on our physiological threat system to protect ourselves from danger. It’s not our fault! But we can get stuck in these patterns. So we have to begin reprogramming that innate brain tendency.

Yes, we literally need to focus on overriding the old patterns with new patterns of self-love, appreciation, and calm. Luckily, because of the amazing neuroplasticity of the brain to create fresh neurons all the time, you can rewire your brain for self-compassion! How?

You reset old unhelpful patterns by breathing and meditating every day with a focus on self-kindness. Slowly but surely, you can begin to build up the “soothing” system in the brain – the one that releases feel-good endorphins and oxytocin – with simple exercises and heart-felt affirmations or visualizations.

The best part? It’s fairly simple. Daily practice is the hard part.

One of the challenges to self-compassion is not only our rather primitive brains, but also how modern culture shapes our thinking about who we are. According to Dr. Gilbert, humans harbor an “old brain/mind” that has evolved over millions of years to respond to danger and threat. Yet, we also have a “modern brain” that is capable of imagination and reflection, including kindness and nurturing that are also necessary for survival.

But such nurturing resources tend to be reserved to those closest to us – not necessarily ourselves and not necessarily for the greater mass of humanity. Modern threats are largely internal (our own thinking) and social (what society thinks). These threats include an inclination to compare ourselves to others, desire for material wealth and status, and cultural expectations for success.

How true this is when I meet with clients. They can list 100 things about what they did wrong, why they are inept parents, how they are to blame for their children’s
problems, and how they can’t live up their own expectations, their spouses, or the PTAs. Not only that, they complain about their work, the economy, their lifestyle, the traffic and the weather. Imagine if you could say, “This is my brain making up all this nonsense. None of it is true!” Instead, through mindful awareness, you catch yourself. You turn toward yourself in love. Simply acknowledge that you are not alone with such feelings and the thoughts will pass. What you do have control over is responding with loving kindness and taking a new action that is much healthier.

That’s the real way to catch a break!

Teaching children self-compassion.

How do we help our children to be self-compassionate? When children make a mistake or do something bad, jumping into reactive criticism is not helpful.

Taking a compassionate approach is accepting and demonstrating that humans make mistakes. In this manner, your child can hear a message of understanding and feel support in how to repair the mistake or overcome a failure. Learning to do this for one self is incredibly adaptive. Studies with children show that they are very receptive to self-compassion skills, such as:

**Three Things:** Reflect on three things that went well in the day and why they did. They can be small things – the moments that often go unnoticed.

**Thank You Notes:** Write a letter to someone who did something nice for you but you never thanked or got the chance to.

**Hug Me:** A self-hug provides physiological comfort and triggers the self-soothing system when one feels lousy, while stress and tantrums trigger aggressive signals (clenching, making a fist, stomping). No matter how silly a self-hug is, the body responds kindly.

**Guides and Guardians:** Help a child imagine an angel, superhero or character that depicts wisdom, caring and compassion. Call on this guide in moments of hardship or heartache. Ask: “What would this guide say to help me feel better?”

**Journaling:** Writing notes or letters of compassion that your angel or guides would write to you – in a supportive and warm tone.

This “dialog” helps to nurture empathy for one’s own distress. It’s similar to the skill for adults: “What would you say to a best friend in need?” Use those words with yourself. It’s radical.

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Give yourself 10 minutes a day.

* Take a few breaths.
* Say a few kind words to yourself.
* Be tender.
* Remind yourself that you are a beautiful soul.

* You are doing the best that you can.
* The only thing that needs to change?

**Loving yourself.**

**Dr. Tara’s Self-Compassion Kit includes:**

1. Self-Compassion 101

2. Self-Compassion Cheat sheet for your fridge, closet door, or vanity mirror

3. Guided visualizations, found at https://soundcloud.com/taracousphd

- Dr. Tara’s Self-Compassion Guided Visualization: Rose Quartz (10 min)
- Dr. Tara’s Self-Compassion Guided Visualization: White Light (7 min)
- Dr. Tara’s Self-Compassion Mini-Meditation: Hands on Heart (3 min)

You can learn more about Dr. Tara’s Moxie Moms Coaching programs for women, mothers and daughters at [www.taracousineau.com](http://www.taracousineau.com).

Sign up for a FREE **Mom Empower Session.**
You can also learn more about one-on-one coaching, online parenting courses, and other awesome communication strategies on my [blog](http://blog) and on [facebook/moxiemomscoaching](http://facebook/moxiemomscoaching).

A li’l self-kindness will do ya!

**Dr. Tara**