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How to Practice Self-Compassion

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18 February 2018

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In the late nineteenth century, Mary Anne Evans published a novel titled *Middlemarch*, *A Study of Provincial Life*. She wrote under the male pen name George Eliot to give her work the greatest likelihood of being taken seriously. And although some of the early reviews were mixed, it has come to be seen as a classic. Indeed, quite a few English writers and literary critics have hailed it as **“the greatest English novel.”** Along these lines,

- *The Guardian* newspaper has said that *Middlemarch* “looms above the mid-Victorian literary landscape like a cathedral of words.”
- Virginia Woolf described it as a “magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people.”
- Hermione Lee, the president of Wolfson College, Oxford, called it “The most profound, wise and absorbing of English novels.”

Presumably almost any writer would be extraordinarily grateful to have one’s book appraised as such a monumental achievement.

Keeping in mind the consensus of renowned literary critics that *Middlemarch* is a classic of world literature, I invite you to also consider the other end of the spectrum. I recently spent some time exploring the anonymous Amazon reviews from readers who rated *Middlemarch* a dismal *one* out of five stars. The following are some representative examples of those “I hated it” reviews:

- Too long and tedious. Great for insomnia!

- “too many characters...not one main character so i got bored fast!”
- “Good ghod, [sic] the author is trying to make her point with bombarding the reader with perpetual pontification... just make your point and let your readers draw their conclusions.... If it were well-written, we might get something from the historical application, but it was not.”
- “I couldn't get through more than a dozen or so pages. The verbage [sic] is archaic and the sentences run on and on and on.”
- “Eliot lacks wit and humor and goes on and on about the most humdrum of details.”

As I read through these negative, anonymous reviews, the words of that contemporary wisdom teacher Billy Madison came to mind as perhaps an appropriate evaluation of their worth: “At no point in your rambling, incoherent response were you even close to anything that could be considered a rational thought. Everyone in this room is now dumber for having listened to it. I award you no points, and may God have mercy on your soul.” But now I’m the one being mean!

More seriously, what should we make of this wide spectrum of opinion? They were all reading the same novel, but reactions ranged from the highest possible praise to the most flippant dismissal. One of the takeaways for me is to remind myself that *billions* of human beings exist on this planet. And **if something you do becomes popular enough, at least quite a few other people will not only hate it, but also will try to let you know that they hate it.**

And even if we know intellectually that it is impossible to please all of the people all of the time, negative feedback can still be devastating. Indeed, it turns out that we humans have evolved to have a “negativity bias” (48). And my favorite metaphor for understanding this dynamic is from a great book by the neuroscientist Rick Hanson titled Buddha’s Brain: **our brains are “like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive experiences”** (68).

That negativity bias helped us survive back when human life was primarily characterized by “continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of [humans], solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, Leviathan, XIII.9). But in many ways, life have gotten better for us humans—even if there is a long way to go. The Industrial Revolution, coupled with a sharp decline in threat from starvation, predators, and disease, is a major reason why the world population of humans beings has *septupled*—increased sevenfold—from the late eighteenth-century to today.

While huge individual and global problems remain, in the past few centuries our species is thriving overall—even if we may end up taking ourselves down, and the climate along with us. (But that’s a topic for another time.) For now, my point is that because of our evolution-inherited negativity bias, many of us need a **“three-to-one ratio” of positive-to-negative moments** to counterbalance the way that our brains fixate on the negative (20).

For instance, if Mary Anne Evans were alive today, I can easily imagine her thinking, “It’s so amazing that Virginia Woolf loves my book, but I can’t believe Reader2307, “Maybe2Critical,” and “A Customer” all hated it. I want to say, who cares what anonymous Internet Trolls think?! But our brains make it easy for us to forget high praise and fixate on minor slights (111).

So what can we do to interrupt this tendency? I’ve shared previously about the spiritual practice of savoring. It is one of the simplest and most effective ways of increasing the ratio of positive to negative experiences in your life. Because even small negative experiences tend to linger in our brains, savoring is a way of augmenting the impact for *positive* experiences. Instead of allowing positive experiences to slip away like Teflon, the invitation is to **slow down, take a few deep breaths, and really notice all the aspects of the experience that are pleasurable**. It takes as little as five, ten, or twenty seconds, but it can be significantly impactful on our overall happiness.

A related technique that I would like to share with you is called self-compassion, which essentially means *being kind to yourself*. And if this sermon leaves you interested in learning more, there is a great book on Self-Compassion by Kristin Neff, who is an Associate Professor of Human Development and Culture at the University of Texas at Austin. For those of you who know the incredible work of Dr. Brené Brown, Neff is doing for self-compassion what Brown has done for vulnerability and courage: shown us the evidence from social science about how powerful and transformative they can be.

As we saw in our the opening example of *Middlemarch*, since there is no guarantee that others will be kind to us, we can start by being kind to ourselves. And practicing self-compassion can, in turn, grow our capacity to be kind to others and to this planet.

Dr. Neff’s book is filled with many exercises for practicing self-compassion, and if you

want to go even deeper, there is a 10-week online course that she has helped developed on Mindful Self-Compassion. For now, in line with the finding that many of us need a “**three-to-one ratio**” of **positive-to-negative moments** to counterbalance the way that our brains fixate on the negative, I will share with you three ways to practice self-compassion.

The first can seem a bit silly, but here’s the thing: it works. I invite you to try it with me.

Give yourself a hug. Don’t get me wrong: getting a hug from someone else is great too, but fascinatingly, science shows that *our bodies* don’t think that self-hugs are silly.

Physiologically, our bodies respond to the stimulus of warmth and care irrespective of whether it is our own arms wrapping around our body. “Our skin is an incredibly sensitive organ....

Physical touch releases oxytocin, provides a sense of security, soothes distressing emotions, and calms cardiovascular stress.” (49). Sounds pretty good. Try it again right now if you want.

A second way of practicing self-compassion is ***reframing***. If you find yourself having trouble being compassionate toward yourself in a given situation, it can help to “**imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you.**” This act of imagination can help unlock a different way of framing the situation (54). And since we’ve already entered into the territory of silly-things-that-nevertheless-work, I will add that another “pro-tip” from Neff is to experiment with adding a term of endearment to your compassionate self-talk. Say to yourself, “Self, Darling/Honey/Sugarlump (whatever you’re into), you haven’t gotten much sleep the last few nights, and you’ve had so many stressful deadlines to meet recently. *[Insert the particulars of your extenuating circumstances.]* Be gentle with yourself.”

In addition to giving yourself a hug and imagining how a friend might help you reframe a situation, a third way of practicing self-compassion is to **memorize a mantra**. (If you’re not into memorization, you can also write it on a card—or save it as a note on a smart phone.) Dr. Neff shares that whenever she notices sometimes about herself that she doesn’t like or whenever sometimes goes wrong in her life, she silently repeats this mantra:

This is a moment of suffering.

Suffering is a part of life.

May I be kind to myself in this moment.

May I give myself the compassion I need. (119)

Note that this mantra reminds her not only of her intention to practice self-compassion (“*May I be kind to myself in this moment*”), but also that her suffering will pass (“*This is a moment of suffering*”) and that her suffering is not unique (“*Suffering is a part of life.*”) Reminding ourselves that *all* human beings suffer reminds us that we are not alone.

Of course, all of this is easier said than done. Neff confesses that even after many years of practice, she does not perfectly practice what she preaches. Our brain’s negativity bias is strong, but we can make strides toward achieving more balance through practices like savoring and self-compassion.

I would also perhaps be remiss if I failed to share that the most perverse thing about practicing self-compassion is that you can find yourself being harsh with yourself for *failing to be self-compassionate* (34). At whatever point you wake up and notice that you’ve ironically spiraled into negative self-talk about failing to be compassionate to yourself, gently give yourself a hug, reframe (imagine what a kind friend would say to you), and/or repeat your mantra:

This is a moment of suffering

Suffering is a part of life.

May I be kind to myself in this moment.

May I give myself the compassion I need.

As the saying goes, “Practice doesn’t make perfect, but it does tend to make *permanent*.” What we practice tends to become habit-forming. So may we be increasingly intentional in practicing self-compassion. May compassion for ourselves and compassion for all sentient beings become second nature to us.