



Be Kind To
Yourself



Nina Bach

A Unique Way for Students to Find Motivation

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1. Students in need

Perseverance and rumination are behaviours that certainly helped primitive humanity survive in a world full of tigers, storms, and famine. Back then, people had to make quick decisions, focus on the most urgent tasks, continue to reproduce, and prepare for dangers – otherwise they would not have been able to pass on their genes.

In today's universities, however, the stressors look quite different – they last much longer than a storm and are more subtle than an empty stomach. Procrastination, test anxiety, pressure to perform: these problems are caused by stressors that, unlike tiger attacks, tend to be protracted. Mindless distraction or rumination will only make them worse (at least in the long term) (Aydın et al., 2020). They affect many students: about 75% of students procrastinate regularly (Steel, 2007) and about 25% have significant test anxiety (Huntley et al., 2019).

No wonder, then, that the well-being of many students decreases in their first year at university (Gunnell et al., 2017). Can instructors do something to ensure that students deal with their stress more mindfully and constructively, so that they procrastinate less and have less test anxiety?

In fact, there is a mindful skill that has been scientifically proven to effectively protect against procrastination, stress, but also depression or burnout (Neff et al., 2005); it improves academic performance (Grunschel et al., 2016) and motivates students to truly *learn* something instead of just achieve a certain grade (Williams et al., 2008).

The skill in question is self-compassion – something very different from self-pity, and the opposite of self-criticism.

2. What is self-compassion?

When we struggle, we often instinctively react with...

- **Numbing, distracting:** surfing Instagram, going shopping, eating chocolate...
- **Self-pity:** "I can't do this, I have to give up, it's too hard, poor me, why me..."
- **Self-criticism:** "I'm so lazy, so stupid; I'm not good at anything; I'm an idiot, a loser; only I could be so stupid..."

Hardly any people react this way if someone else is struggling. If we were to tell other people that they are lazy, losers, good for nothing, it would be considered an insult at best and abuse at worst. In general, when it comes to other people, we tend to react with more compassion and understanding than we show ourselves.

If we also offer ourselves understanding, compassion, warmth, that is, if we have *self-compassion*, it can improve our well-being enormously (Neff, 2015). Contrary to many people's gut instincts, self-compassion doesn't mean that we no longer look critically at our actions and become lazy and narcissistic; in fact, studies have indicated that people who practice a

lot of self-compassion are more hard-working, more likely to achieve their goals, and more realistic about their level of competence (Dundas et al., 2017).

Self-compassion consists of three elements:

- **Mindfully perceiving** that you are experiencing difficult thoughts and emotions. We tend to react to difficult thoughts and feelings such as self-pity or self-criticism with denial, numbing and distraction, or we over-identify with the thought/feeling, until it feels like the only truth in our life and we forget other thoughts and feelings can exist. Mindfulness prevents both of these unhealthy reactions.
- **Normalizing what you have experienced.** Remind yourself that other people have the same thoughts and feelings, especially in circumstances similar to yours; explain to yourself why you're thinking/feeling this way and where you learned to do that; remember that you are not alone. This prevents the feelings of isolation which usually accompany internal struggles.
- **Be kind to yourself.** Give yourself a few warm, encouraging words or a loving gesture; this self-directed kindness can be gentle, calming, and comforting; or strong, motivating, and energetic (Neff & Germer, 2018). It can be silent and internal, or out loud and external. The aim is to calm down and/or motivate yourself as needed.

Self-compassion can be practised informally, simply within the framework of one's own thoughts. But you can also do formal, written exercises, for example by writing a small letter to yourself. There are also meditations, i.e. audio exercises, where a speaker guides you through the three elements of self-compassion.

The important thing about self-compassion is that it needs to be personal. For example, some people like to put a hand on their hearts or even hug themselves while practising self-compassion. Others would feel very uncomfortable doing that. Some like to talk to themselves in the second person ("You can do it"), others prefer the first ("I can do it"). It's normal for self-compassion to feel weird at first. It takes a bit of time to find your own style of expressing self-compassion.

3. What can instructors do to help students develop more self-compassion?

You can't "get" self-compassion – it's a (lifelong) practice with no limit. One can always become a bit more self-compassionate. Students first need to learn about the concept and then, well, practice it. The bad news about this is that instructors cannot guarantee that students' well-being and motivation will improve significantly within the framework of a single course.

However, even laying the groundwork for self-compassion will at least help students experience less active anxiety and stress in the course. And the good news is that even small measures in a course can ensure that students learn about the concept and start to be self-compassionate a little more often.

In the following sections, you will therefore find three practical ideas for nudging your students towards more self-compassion without too much effort.

A tip in advance: Try out some self-compassion exercises for yourself (see Table 1 for resources) before deciding what role it should play in your teaching. This will give you a better basis for decision-making and discussions with students. Self-compassion could also help alleviate your own stress; an anti-correlation between stress and self-compassion has been found among teachers (Hwang et al., 2019).

3.1. Idea: Discuss self-compassion in class

Instructors can explicitly introduce students to the idea and relevance of self-compassion and ask them to try out an exercise – this is the most time-consuming, but probably also the most effective measure you can take in your teaching.

Here are some suggestions for how to go about this:

1. **Lay a foundation.** Use an anonymous survey to find out how many students are prone to procrastination, find their studies stressful, are afraid of exams, etc. Then present the survey results as well as general statistics (see section 1. Students in need) and affirm that students who struggle are not alone. *Minimum time needed: 3 minutes*
2. **Explain self-compassion.** Briefly explain the concept using your own or outside materials. *Minimum time needed: 5 minutes*
3. **Make relevance clear.** Explain that self-compassion can help with the problems mentioned in step 1. *Minimum time needed: 2 minutes*
4. **Ask them to try.** Have students do a self-compassion exercise. (See Appendix 6: Material for Students) It's a good idea to give students 3–4 choices of exercises so that they can try the variant that most appeals to them. *Minimum time needed: 10 minutes*
5. **Discuss reactions, especially resistance.** Students are now allowed to share how they liked the exercises – here it is advisable to first conduct an anonymous survey to gather some honest responses, then possibly a discussion in small groups; finally a discussion with the entire class. Resistance towards the idea of self-compassion (“It will make me weak/lazy...”) is normal and shouldn't be judged. Just mention the extensive research that has been done on self-compassion's effects, and remind students that it can take some experimentation to discover the exercises that speak to them and get used to the practice. *Minimum time needed: 10 minutes*

This process will work online as well as during an in-person meeting. The steps that do not require discussion (steps 2-4) be shifted particularly well to self-study. Step 1 benefits from discussion, but can also work as self-study. The entire process can take as little as 30 minutes, although you can spend more time on it as well.

Advantages

- It is effective because students are encouraged to deal with the topic more intensively through the practical experience and discussion.

Disadvantages

- It costs time and effort: You not only need at least 30 minutes of course time, but also need to prepare the entire process (cognitively, logistically, emotionally).

3.2. Idea: Create a (self-)compassionate learning culture

If you would rather not invest the effort to “teach” self-compassion as in the previous idea, you can try to change the learning culture in your culture. This will consist of expressing compassion and modelling self-compassion.

Normalize struggles. Mention in passing and again and again that procrastination, test anxiety, etc. are completely normal and indeed quite common. In this way, you are modelling aspect 2 of self-compassion (normalizing the experience). Maybe even mention the statistics on procrastination etc. Don’t hesitate to share your own experiences with those issues: Have you ever procrastinated? Performed poorly on an exam because you were anxious? Comments like this, even if they are on-the-fly and in passing, will change the tone of the course and give students something to think about; they’re likely to feel less isolated and ashamed.

Model self-compassion. As part of the anecdotes mentioned above about own struggles, you can show that you don’t judge yourself for struggling – that you are kind to yourself. If you make mistakes while teaching, such as misstating something or forgetting to upload the slides, then you have an opportunity to model all three elements of self-compassion as well. Show students how you talk to yourself (for example: *“Oh, sorry for forgetting to upload the slides. I always feel bad when I forget something. But on the other hand, everyone forgets something from time to time, right? Nobody’s perfect. Thanks for the reminder.”*). When instructors never admit to their own mistakes or express self-critical thoughts, they give students the message that mistakes aren’t okay.

Be compassionate. Check in with students occasionally and ask how they’re doing – by starting class with quick icebreaker exercises; using anonymous surveys to ask students about their general stress levels and specific feedback about the class; and replacing lecture time with activities that give students a chance to practice, make mistakes, and ask questions. These are all things that are extraordinarily conducive to learning and motivating anyway. When students make mistakes, express stress or confusion, or have requests about the class, react with compassion. Show students you value their presence and ideas, and that their concerns are okay. Of course, this doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t correct mistakes or fulfill students’ every wish; it just means that you show interest in them and do what you *can* for them.

Advantages

- This creates trust between you and the students – and this is generally beneficial in teaching (Cavanagh et al., 2018). Students will be more motivated.
- It is easy because you only have to change your communication a little. Quick icebreakers, anonymous surveys, or activities are also flexible and easy to implement.

- Since there is no explicit discussion of self-compassion, those students who find it too hokey or emotional won't be put off.

Disadvantages

- It may take some time before you find your own style of communication and relationship-building. Your actions should be authentic and match your personality.
- Since there is no explicit discussion of self-compassion, students will not learn about the concept and won't be able to do further research on their own.

3.3. Idea: Share resources

The first idea was very explicit and intentional, the second more implicit and subtle. There's middle ground as well: mention in class that self-compassion is beneficial, and then share resources that interested students can look into. Those who are intrigued will check the resources out, those who aren't will ignore them.

You can recommend the resources in Table 1 to your students and/or pass on the material from the appendix.

Advantages of the method

- It is extremely low-cost to simply mention a concept and share some links.
- It is individualized: only those students who are intrigued will follow up on the idea. They can also choose the resources that speak to them.

Disadvantage of the method

- Students who might benefit hugely from self-compassion, but experience initial resistance or are simply too busy, will not check out the resources and thus won't benefit from them.

Understanding and Practising Self-Compassion: Helpful Resources

Title	What is it?	Language	Cost	Link
The Space Between Self-Esteem and Self Compassion: Kristin Neff at TEDxCentennialPark-Women	This 19-minute TED talk by the original self-compassion researcher, Kristin Neff, has been viewed 2.5 million times.	English	--	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTZBUSplr4
Self-Compassionate Motivation	This 3-minute Youtube video by Kristin Neff is a brief introduction to motivating oneself in a kind way.	English	--	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVzOvctvqOc
self-compassion.org	Website with written exercises and meditations for download – directly from the leading researcher on self-compassion, Kristin Neff.	English	--	https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#guided-meditations
Meditations by Christine Brähler	Website with meditations for download from a well-known researcher, Christine Brähler.	English and German	--	https://www.christinebraehler.com/meditations/
Self-Compassion - The Workbook	An exercise book with many written exercises by well-known researchers Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer.	English and German	Approx. 20 €	https://www.buecher.de/shop/ratgeber--lebenshilfe/the-mindful-self-compassion-workbook-a-proven-way-to-accept-yourself-build-inner-strength-and-thrive/neff-kristin-germer-christopher/products_products/detail/prod_id/49668222/
7mind	Mindfulness app with many exercises and courses. Many universities in Germany offer students free licences for this app; some German health insurance also covers the costs.	German	Basic version free, Pro costs about €80 / year	https://www.7mind.de/
Medito	Free, not-for-profit meditation app; self-compassion is among the many topics covered	English	Free	https://meditofoundation.org/medito-app

Table 1: Self-compassion resources you can recommend to your students.

4. Takeaway: Self-compassion and motivation go hand in hand

The three practical ideas in this chapter can be easily combined with one another. You can implement all three – i.e. explicitly address the concept (3.1. Idea: Discuss self-compassion), share resources from Table 1 or the appendix (3.3. Idea: Share resources), and subsequently create an appropriate learning culture (3.2. Idea: Create a (self-)compassionate learning culture). Or you can choose one of the strategies. If you want to experience self-compassion for yourself first, you might want to try out some resources for yourself; they're not just beneficial for students.

Whatever suits you and your teaching, there are easy ways to help your students become a bit more self-compassionate and thus positively influence their mental well-being, motivation, and academic performance.

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6. Appendix: Material for students

6.1. Introduction: What is self-compassion?

Please imagine the following:

Your girlfriend is putting off studying for her exam. You tell her, "You're just lazy and good for nothing."

Your friend failed an exam and you tell him: "You're just too stupid – such a loser!"

It's hard to imagine talking to your friends like that, isn't it?

Is that how you talk to yourself?

Our inner dialogue is often very self-critical – much meaner than we would ever be to our friends or even to strangers. The problem with self-criticism is that while it may motivate us in the very short term, long-term it's so unpleasant that we feel exhausted and drained; we also start actually believing that we're fundamentally flawed and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Luckily, there is a different way to talk to ourselves – a kinder way called **self-compassion**. It consists of three elements:

1. **Recognizing** that one's own situation is difficult (don't go in denial, and don't over-identify with the difficult thoughts and emotions)
2. **Normalize** your difficult feelings and thoughts by explaining to yourself where they come from and reminding yourself that other people experience the same things.
3. **Be kind** to yourself; wish yourself happiness and less stress.

If the idea of self-compassion seems strange or even dangerous, then the following study results¹ might surprise you:

¹ 1 Barnard, L. K., & Curry, J. F. (2012). The Relationship of Clergy Burnout to Self-Compassion and Other Personality Dimensions. *Pastoral Psychology*, 61(2), 149–163.
Neely, M. E., Schallert, D. L., Mohammed, S. S., Roberts, R. M., & Chen, Y.-J. (2009). Self-kindness when facing stress: The role of self-compassion, goal regulation, and support in college students' well-being. *Motivation and Emotion*, 33(1), 88–97.
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- Self-compassion protects against burnout, perfectionism, anxiety, and depression
- Self-compassion is related to happiness, well-being, and overall life satisfaction

Self-compassion can be helpful, especially during your studies. Because there is no “time off from being a student. Instead, there are exams and assignments that you have to complete on your own. It’s hard to know whether you’re doing “the right thing” and when enough is enough; and no matter how hard you try, there may always be someone who seems to be able to do everything better. No wonder that around 75% of students are regular procrastinators, and their well-being tends to get worse when they arrive at college.

If you want to give self-compassion a chance, you’ll find three exercises in this workbook. In the beginning, self-compassion often feels weird – that’s normal. But the more you practice, the more natural it will feel and the more benefits you will reap from the exercises.

6.2 Exercise: Compassionate Letter

1. Please think of a current struggle, perhaps in your studies: a problem that is bothering you and that you blame yourself for; a quality you don't like about yourself; or a mistake you've made.

On a scale of 1-10, the struggle should be around 5-6 in terms of the burden it places on you – so it shouldn't be a small annoyance, but it shouldn't be terrible, either.

How do you feel when you think about this struggle?



Please be honest with yourself and allow your natural thoughts and feelings about this to surface. Don't exaggerate, but don't push anything away either. Write down a few key points:

2. Now imagine a friend: a person who likes and accepts you unconditionally. They are compassionate and benevolent. Imagine that this person can see all your weaknesses *and* strengths and knows everything about you. They know that we humans all have our weaknesses and are influenced by things (our genes, family, circumstances) that are beyond our control.

Now write a letter to yourself from that person's perspective. What would they tell you about your struggle, from their friendly perspective? How would the person remind you that you're only human? How would they express their well-wishes and care for you? And if you think the person has suggestions for you, how would they express those suggestions with understanding?



Write a short letter:

6.3. Exercise: Motivation check

1. Think about how you use self-criticism as a motivational tool. Is there a trait that you criticize yourself for (e.g., laziness, a tendency to procrastinate, difficulty studying) because you believe that self-criticism will help you improve? If so, how does it feel when you criticize yourself for it? What thoughts and feelings do you have?



Please be honest with yourself and allow your natural thoughts and feelings about this to surface. Don't exaggerate, but don't push anything away either. Write down a few key points:

2. Now see if you can find a kinder, more caring way to motivate yourself when needed. What advice would a friendly person give you to do? (Think of the friend from the previous exercise in which you wrote the letter.) How can you kindly motivate yourself to change your behaviour, while still accepting yourself as a person?



Write a short letter or write down key points:

6.4. Exercise: First aid for procrastination

Procrastination means that you know you should work on something, but you just can't get started. Instead, you may distract yourself with something else. Most of the time, however, you are stressed and guilty because you know that you should actually get to work on the original task.

Just delaying working on something because it will fit your schedule better later, or because you know you work better on a tight deadline, isn't procrastination. Procrastination is when you *know* you *should* be working now, and believe that the delay is a bad thing.

Part 1: Procrastination is human

1. Think of a situation where you put something off. (Maybe you're even procrastinating something right now.) How do you react to procrastination – what thoughts and feelings go through your head? Are you stressed? Guilty? Do you criticize yourself?



Please be honest with yourself and allow your natural thoughts and feelings about this to surface. Don't exaggerate, but don't push anything away either. Write down a few key points:

2. The fact is that most humans procrastinate, and nobody likes working on unpleasant tasks. The brain is designed to save energy and avoid scary things. What if you fully accepted the fact that you have been procrastinating and that doesn't make you a bad or flawed person, it just makes you human?



How can you express kindness and understanding for the fact that you have been procrastinating? Write a few sentences you could say to yourself.

Part 2: Failure is human

Sometimes we procrastinate not because we find a task stupid and boring, but because we are afraid of it. It puts pressure on us – "what if I fail?"

Researchers have discovered that procrastination can be a form of unconscious self-sabotage. If you tell your friends "I barely studied, no wonder I failed," then no one can think that you were too stupid for the material.

1. Imagine yourself failing at the task. Allow your natural reaction to surface. Don't push anything away, but keep in mind that this is just an imaginary scenario, and your thoughts and feelings aren't objective truths.



Describe your thoughts and feelings when you imagine yourself failing:

2. Remember that all people fail to reach their goals sometimes. Small children fall on their faces, high schoolers get bad grades, students fail exams, people get fired from their jobs. This all happens to thousands of people around the world – every day! Even if you fail, you won't be alone.



In your own words, remind yourself that failure is normal:

3. Can you imagine not practising self-criticism in the future if you fail? Could you be kind and understanding with yourself instead? How about reminding yourself that you did your best, even if you wish you had done more?



Write down how you are going to talk to yourself if you fail at your task. Choose kind and understanding words.

The next time you're faced with your task, remind yourself it's okay to want to procrastinate and it's okay if you end up failing at the task. That acceptance might make it easier to get working, at least for a little while. It's okay if you need to take small steps, take lots of breaks, and come back to your self-compassion practice again and again.