

# Self-compassion in autism

Wenn Lawson & Peter Vermeulen



Who is Wenn? Who is Peter?

## What to expect from this talk

- What is self-compassion
- Self compassion: what we can do
- 3 apposing areas of self-compassion
- Non-Autistic & Autistic Identity:
  - Why, if we are autistic, are we so hard on ourselves?
  - Shared humanity: nobody's perfect
- The environment: supporting self-compassion



The illustration shows a person in a teal suit standing in front of a red-framed mirror, looking at their reflection. A large, dark brown hand is positioned in the foreground, holding a green tree with many leaves. The background is a bright yellow gradient.

## Terms: Compassion and Self-compassion:

**Compassion:**  
com- passion: co-suffering: sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it: being supportive  
*(as conceptualized in Buddhist philosophy)*

**Self-compassion:**  
the same attitude and feeling, but applied to ourselves when we fail, have feelings of personal inadequacy, or life challenges ...  
*(This feeling is warm and caring rather than cold and judgmental)*



The image shows a close-up of a hand held open, palm up, against a background of a bright sun or light source, creating a warm, golden glow.

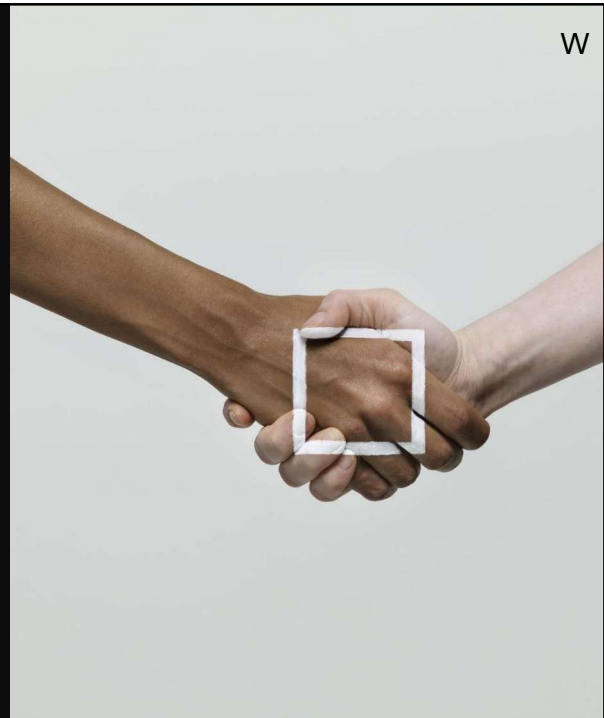
## A little test on self-compassion

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- Do you say: 'silly me' when you mess up or do you say: 'Oh well'?
- Do you hate your **imperfections**, or do you **accept them** as part of who you are?
- When you fail at something, do you blame yourself or do you think: 'I **get it wrong sometimes**; we all learn from mistakes. **I'm OK**'?
- When you feel inadequate, do you think 'it's only me' or do you remind yourself feelings of inadequacy **are part of being human**?

## Self-compassion is:

- Being **kind** and forgiving towards yourself
- **Accepting, caring** and **empathetic** towards yourself
- **Not-criticizing** yourself
- **Understanding your sadness & pain (courage & wisdom)**
- **Not sugar coating your challenges**



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## Self-compassion: three domains – six elements

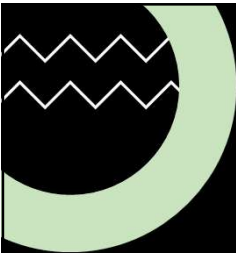
**ANNUAL REVIEWS**



*Annual Review of Psychology*  
**Self-Compassion: Theory, Method, Research, and Intervention**

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- **Emotional reaction:** kindness vs. judgment
- **Cognitive understanding:** isolating or part of human experience
- **Attention:** Mindful or overidentifying



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Being Kind begins with self



But, What's behind the smile?



Mindfulness (2021) 12:121–140  
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01505-4

ORIGINAL PAPER



# The Development and Validation of the State Self-Compassion Scale (Long- and Short Form)

Kristin D. Neff<sup>1</sup> · István Tóth-Király<sup>2</sup> · Marissa C. Knox<sup>1</sup> · Ashley Kuchar<sup>1</sup> · Oliver Davidson<sup>1</sup>

## Assessment of self-compassion



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Self-Compassion  
Dr. Kristin Neff

SELF-COMPASSION PRACTICE PUBLIC EVENTS COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR RESEARCH

Welcome to the Self-Compassion Test!  
Please read each statement carefully before answering. To the left of each item, indicate how often you behave in the stated manner, using the following scale:

Almost Never	Occasionally	About Half Of The Time	Fairly Often	Almost Always
1	2	3	4	5



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## Self-compassion: misunderstanding

Self-compassion is ***not***:


- **self-pity**: feeling sorry for yourself
- **self-indulgence**: going easy on yourself
- **selfish and self-centered**: less caring towards others
- **making you soft and weak**
- **meaning you won't try again**

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## Self-compassion and mental health

Research: **self-compassionate** individuals experience **greater psychological health** than those who lack self-compassion.



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## Self-compassion and mental health

Reduces risk for depression, anxiety, negative affect and loneliness

(Stutts et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2021)

Enhances positive mind states while lessening negative ones, such as shame

(Miyagawa & Taniguchi, 2020; Siwik et al., 2022)

Enhances emotion regulation skills

(Inwood & Ferrari, 2018)

Linked to greater happiness, positive affect, and satisfaction with life

(meta-analysis, Zessin et al., 2015)

Linked to more autonomy, competence, and relatedness

(Gunnell et al., 2017)

## Self-compassion in autism

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Autism



Impact Factor: 5.2 / 5-Year Impact Factor: 6.3

Journal Homepage

Submission Guidelines

Restricted access | Research article | First published online November 6, 2022

The indirect effect of self-compassion in the association between autistic traits and anxiety/depression: A cross-sectional study in autistic and non-autistic adults

John Galvin and Gareth Richards [View all authors and affiliations](#)

Volume 27, Issue 5 | <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221132109>


**On average autistic people reported lower self-compassion than non-autistic people.**

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Home > Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders > Article

## “Self-compassion changed my life”: The self-compassion experiences of autistic and non-autistic adults and its relationship with mental health and psychological wellbeing

Original Paper | Published: 29 July 2022  
Volume 53, pages 1066–1081, (2023) [Cite this article](#)




**Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders**

[Aims and scope](#) →  
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# Self-compassion in autism

Autistic participants reported significantly lower self-compassion than non-autistic adults, and in both groups, those with higher self-compassion reported higher psychological wellbeing and lower depression symptoms.


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AUTISM IN ADULTHOOD  
Volume 5, Number 3, 2023  
© Mary Ann Liebert, Inc.  
DOI: 10.1089/aut.2022.0068

**Brief Research Report**

Open camera or QR reader and scan code to access this article and other resources online.



### The Inter-Relationship of Emotion Regulation, Self-Compassion, and Mental Health in Autistic Adults

Rui Ying Cai,<sup>1,2</sup> Abigail Love,<sup>1</sup> Ainslie Robinson,<sup>1</sup> and Vicki Gibbs<sup>1,3</sup>

## We found that autistic adults with higher levels of self-compassion had better emotion regulation and fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression.

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## Increased negativity: link with cognitive style in autism

- **Monotropism: Rumination and self-criticizing?**
- **Absolute thinking – perfectionism** → increased self-criticism
- **Uncertainty: brains that don't trust themselves**
- **Experiences = not meeting expectations**
- **Feeling like an imposter ...**
- **Attribution style?** Internal or external: when something does not work out well, some autistic people = internal attribution: they blame themselves

## Why Lower self-compassion in autism?

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Here's the good news!

Self-compassion not a fixed personality trait, it's a **skill** that can be learned and practiced.

We can create **environments** that cultivate self-compassion.

1. Reclaim Health
2. Practice Intuitive Self-Care
3. Cultivate Self-Love
4. Declare Your Own Authentic Beauty
5. Build Community

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Original Article



## A qualitative exploration of an autism-specific self-compassion program: The ASPAA

Chris Edwards<sup>1,2</sup> , Vicki Gibbs<sup>1,3</sup> , Abigail M A Love<sup>1</sup> ,  
Lydia Brown<sup>4,5,6</sup> and Ru Ying Cai<sup>1</sup> 

Autism  
2024, Vol. 28(6) 1419–1430  
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DOI: 10.1177/13623613241234097  
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## Positive results

- self-compassion = **big positive** = wellbeing
- self-compassion = **a journey**, takes time and practice: hard at first **but gets easier**
- valued the **real-life examples** of other autistic people



## But we need to make it autism friendly

- maintaining focus and concentration
  - **difficult** to practice
  - **emotionally confronting**
  - took **lots of energy**
- need for **adapted language**, more visuals, less vague verbal instructions



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### Mindfulness bij Autisme

Een praktische wegwijzer voor hulpverleners en mensen met ASS

Home (English)

Theory of Mindfulness

Book

Articles

Annelies Spek

## Home (English)

### Autism and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a relatively new therapy that can help people with autism to actively create a more peaceful mind.

Regular mindfulness interventions are usually 'too vague' for people with autism. This motivated us about six years ago to develop a mindfulness intervention specifically intended for adults with ASD, which takes into account their cognitive strengths and weaknesses. This resulted in a therapy which can be easily used, not only by clinicians but also by people with autism themselves.



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## How to cultivate self-compassion

**What can you do for yourself?**

**Be your best friend**

**How can **the environment** support you?**

**By being **'you'** friendly.....**



## Nurturing self-compassion

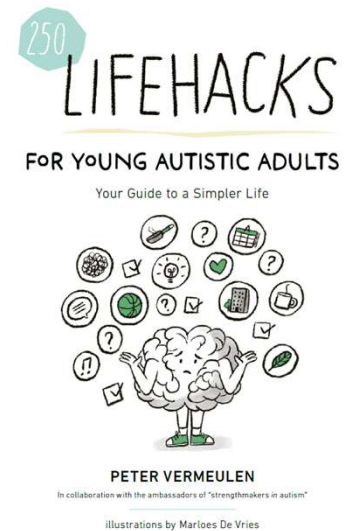
- Surround yourself with self-compassion reminders:
  - **I am good enough**
  - Uplifting quotes:
- E.g:
  - 'I've done my best.'
  - 'Everyone finds learning new things hard.'
  - **'I don't have to be perfect.'**
  - 'We all make mistakes ....'
  - 'It's OK if I can't do this, I might need to do it differently.'
  - **'I'm a good and lovable person.'**



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## Nurturing self-compassion

- **Don't** compare yourself to others
- **Find your tribe** & contact with other autistic people
- Plan activities where you **can be yourself**
- Engage with your interest: flow activities
- Ask to meet expectations **in your 'autistic' way**
- **Be patient**: it takes time and practice
- Surround yourself **with compassionate people**



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## A self-compassion supportive environment

- An **understanding** environment **accepting** of autistic identity
- An environment **that embraces our humanity**
- A **strengths focused** environment
- An environment modeling **self-compassion** or pushing the 'self-compassion' button if you self-criticize...



## Understanding & Welcoming Autistic Identity

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- We need to **understand** 'self', to welcome who we are
- We need to **understand difference**, we are not 'a failed non-autistic' person, we are a **perfectly normal autistic person**
- This knowing = helps self-compassion..



Becoming kinder and more welcoming to yourself

**Consider Self-compassion interventions** for young children / people with LD, those who cannot do mindfulness or usual 'cognitive strategies'

What can we offer them?



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## Nurturing self-compassion in children

- Encouraging interests, joining their interests.  
Message = you're important to me.
- Accepting feelings  
E.g. "You're upset. It's OK".
- Forgive your child.  
E.g., "Accidents happen".

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## Nurturing Self-Compassion in Kids

- Showing kindness in your family.  
E.g., allow child a break from the washing up on busy school nights..
- Praise them when they show themselves compassion.  
E.g., you could say: 'I know you're upset that you didn't win an award. But I'm proud of you saying you did your best.
- Create social stories about self-compassion


Some useful additional video's



Wenn Lawson  
on Interoception



Wenn Lawson  
on Object Permanence



Curtin University:  
Autism and mental  
health




Ellie Middleton on  
Being your autistic self



Carrie DeJong  
on Interoception

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How did we do? We appreciate your comment.

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