

# SESSION 11: Self-Compassion

## WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

If you're new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the first ten sessions because they make up the core foundation. You'll need this to benefit from the remaining sessions

## SO LET'S GET STARTED

Again, as a reminder, the 3 As of awakening are *Attending*, *Appreciating*, and *Acting* with love. Attending leads to appreciation, which then leads to skillful loving action. Appreciation has two meanings, however: both understanding the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both of these aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called "Appreciative Attending," generate wisdom and reverence, which enable us to fulfill our purpose—to nurture and savor Life. Inspired by reverence for Life, we can then take *Action* to benefit all of Life—others and ourselves—with a loving heart, while enjoying each brief and precious moment of existence.

In our last session, we discussed the challenging practice of abstaining from harm, especially from good-now-bad-later behaviors, such as acting on cravings or urges to hurt.

In today's session, we'll talk about compassion. Specifically, we'll talk first about self-compassion for the next two sessions before talking about compassion for others, because self-compassion is necessary for our own vitality and for healing our Love Wound.

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Let's start by defining self-compassion. **Self-compassion refers to actions we take to relieve our own suffering or enhance our own well-being.** We need to treat ourselves with the same kindness, care, and concern that we would treat someone else we love. Too often, we cut ourselves out of the circle of our compassion. When we show ourselves compassion, we literally suffer with ourselves, giving ourselves the kindness and care we need to heal and feel better.

Self-compassion is **the act of being kind to ourselves and taking good care of ourselves, even when we mess up.** Rather than beating ourselves up, we focus on how we can learn from our mistakes. We forgive ourselves and let go of the need to be perfect, because we're good just as we are. We're no better or worse than anyone else—just another beautiful bozo on the bus.

Sadly, many people don't love themselves. Instead, they're harshly self-critical. They've suffered injury to the sense of their innate goodness. For most of us, we believed the negative messages we received in the past. As others have criticized us, so do we absorb and continue to criticize ourselves.

Self-hatred is generally caused by neglect, abuse, or other trauma while growing up. Victims of the disease of self-hatred experience a deep insecurity about the value of their existence. They lack a sense of wholeness because they didn't receive emotional warmth and nurturing during childhood. Instead, their parents subjected them to negative, critical, or punitive parenting. Parental overprotection can also bring on insecurity and self-criticism. Painful peer relationships while growing up, including experiences of rejection or bullying, also contribute to self-hatred.

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The self-criticism that comes from self-hatred can promote addiction, depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders, and other psychiatric illnesses. It damages relationships, as people who hate themselves tend to avoid intimacy out of fear of rejection. Or, they find themselves inflicting upon others the harsh judgments they inflict upon themselves. So, they usually experience less relationship satisfaction and more rejection.

**Self-criticism robs us of happiness, peace, and serenity as it poisons the joy of existence.**

Why do we beat ourselves up? In part, because we believe we deserve it and that somehow, punishing ourselves will make us do better or be better.

The problem is that self-abuse only makes things worse. In self-criticism, we're both the attacker and the attacked. This creates stress and releases the stress hormone cortisol in the body, which can strain the adrenal glands. People often lose faith and give up on themselves, sometimes resorting to suicide.

Self-compassion is the opposite of self-criticism and is the antidote to self-hatred. Those blessed with self-compassion are kind to themselves and give themselves understanding when faced with personal inadequacies and failures. They don't engage in self-judgment and self-criticism. Instead, they have a sense of **our common humanity as perfectly imperfect people**, each of us trying to get by as best we can. If negative or self-critical thoughts arise, they refuse to get hooked.

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The way to motivate and inspire ourselves is to care for ourselves and accept our many shortcomings. We need to practice loving ourselves the way we may have never been loved before. This means becoming our own ideal parent who cares for us as if we were our own cherished child. This allows us to grow, improve, and reach our full potential. It also protects us from psychiatric illnesses like depression and addiction.

### **Benefits of Self-Compassion**

Self-compassion has many benefits. It reduces our stress and painful emotions, and it promotes strength, resilience, and courage. It enhances our well-being and happiness, releasing oxytocin and endorphins that help us feel safe, connected, and soothed. When we love ourselves, we ask, “What can I do to help myself feel better?” This optimizes our vitality. When we’re vital, we’re more motivated to get out and live life to the fullest. We feel more connected to others, so we have better relationships.

Self-compassion gives us a more positive outlook on ourselves, which counters negativity. Less negativity results in less suffering, which makes us less likely to addict to soothe ourselves or harm ourselves in other ways. It also enhances coping and resilience, healing us through difficult times.

**When we love ourselves with compassion, we experience our sacredness.** We cherish ourselves and others. We exercise, eat a healthy diet, get plenty of rest, have fun, spend time with others, keep a daily spiritual practice, and engage in work to develop our fullest capacities so that we can live this precious gift of life to the fullest.

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Self-compassion is also linked to greater personal accountability because we can own our behavior without beating ourselves up. When we can name and claim our behavior without shaming ourselves, we can correct our mistakes and make things right. This reduces conflict and stress. And when we can give ourselves the caring and support we need, we have more of ourselves to give to others. We're more caring, intimate, less critical, and less controlling. When we stop judging ourselves, we also stop judging others. This makes us more accepting of not only our own faults and flaws, but the faults and flaws of the people in our lives.

For example, addiction starts and ends with a lack of self-love. Why would we destroy ourselves if there wasn't a part of us that didn't love us? Recovery, on the other hand, starts and ends with self-love. If we truly love ourselves completely, we won't harm ourselves, so the healing of recovery includes a transition from self-hatred to self-compassion and self-love.

Self-compassion provides the benefits of unconditional self-esteem without the pitfalls of conditions based on our traits, performance, or what others think of us. We see that we don't have to be better than others. We can see ourselves realistically and honestly, warts and all. We shift our life motivation from fear-based avoidance of mistakes to love-based pursuit of meaning and fulfillment. This enhances resilience in the face of inevitable difficulties.

**Self-compassion promotes positivity, optimism, and success in life, which lead to happiness.**

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## Barriers to Self-Compassion

Now let's talk about some of the barriers to self-compassion. When we lack reverence for ourselves, we fall into self-neglect, losing the motivation to take care of ourselves. Our Love Wound is the single core barrier to experiencing self-compassion. Our deep sense of being unworthy includes a sense that we are not worthy of compassion.

Another **barrier to self-compassion is conditional self-esteem**. It's a problem when we believe we must be special and above average—when it isn't okay to just be average or below average. But if we base our worth on our traits, such as beauty, intelligence, performance, or what others think of us, we always look for ways to build ourselves up and put others down. This leads to having an unrealistic, inflated self-image.

**Performance-based or attribute-based esteem has led to an epidemic of narcissism in our culture.** This type of self-esteem also fuels bullying, prejudice, and contempt for those less fortunate or less gifted. It creates indifference, cruelty, and hard-heartedness. When self-esteem is conditional, it leads to a lack of accountability. If we make a mistake, we may blame others for our own bad behavior in order to salvage our self-esteem.

A critical issue in untangling the knot of low self-esteem is **discerning the difference between feeling good, or not, about ourselves and feeling good, or not, about our actions**. If you look closely within yourself, you will discover that **confusing the two of these can block self-compassion**. It is possible to not feel good about something we've done and still feel good about ourselves. Some people talk about the difference between self-esteem and self-worth.

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If we do something unwholesome, we will feel a lack of esteem for what we've done, but our self-worth will be intact if we are healthy. This capacity to feel badly about what we've done is important for us to take accountability for our actions and motivates us to behave better. What blocks self-compassion is when we merge feeling bad about what we've done with feeling bad about who we are. The practice of love calls us to ground ourselves in our innate unconditional goodness despite our faults, flaws, and failings.

Another barrier to self-compassions is the **mistaken belief that we need to beat ourselves up to get better**. We believe self-criticism is helpful. Some people believe that self-compassion takes away the drive to grow and improve. This isn't true. In fact, the opposite is true. Self-criticism can zap our motivation, so we feel unable to do things. What we need to see is that taking effective action helps us, not self-criticism, and we are more likely to take effective action with kind encouragement than with self-criticism.

If we show ourselves compassion, the healing and vitalizing consequences of self-compassion enable us to do what we need to do to care for ourselves and to make improvements in how skillfully we live our lives. Self-blame and self-condemnation are counterproductive and harmful. As Jung says, "We cannot change anything until we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses."

Closely linked to self-condemnation is the belief in punishment. If we were punished growing up, we may feel we need to be punished when we mess up. Then we may punish ourselves. This blocks self-compassion. Look within you to see if you ever have the belief that you "deserve" to suffer as punishment for your mistakes. Again, the truth of things is that punishment by and large does not work. It instills the message that we are "bad" and deserve to suffer.

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Another **barrier to self-compassion is a negative belief about self-compassion itself. This belief is that self-compassion is unhelpful or even harmful.** Some may believe that self-compassion will make us lazy, self-indulgent, self-absorbed, or undisciplined. Some people believe that if they showed themselves compassion, they would make more mistakes, would stagnate, and get nothing done. Some may feel that self-compassion is “weak” or too “touchy feely.” Others may equate self-compassion with self-pity and not taking accountability for one’s actions.

Look within yourself and see if you feel an aversion to self-compassion. Does it feel fake or inauthentic? Our Love Wound may have so much self-hatred in it that we may feel we don’t deserve compassion. What may be needed for you is forgiveness of your faults, flaws, mistakes and failings. You may also need forgiveness of the harm you have caused others or for the ways you have let others down. We’ll be focusing on forgiveness later in this course. For now, just notice if you see any harsh self-condemnation, because that will be a barrier to self-compassion. We need to face the depth of our self-aversion to heal it. We must embrace our self-hatred with an intention that we not suffer. We’ll talk more about healing this self-hatred in our next session.

Another contributor to self-condemnation is perfectionism. **Perfectionism hinders self-compassion.** Were you conditioned to have a belief that you needed to be perfect to be OK? None of us lives up perfectly to our vision of the ideal or perfect, so if you harbor the belief that you *should* be perfect then you’ll always be disappointed in yourself and prone to then beating up on yourself.

Sometimes people get stuck in self-judgment and self-criticism. It becomes a compulsive thought loop that seems to have a mind of its own. We will be practicing techniques for rescuing our minds from these negative ruminations.



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Interacting with critical and judgmental people can block self-compassion if we buy into the negative messages we receive. **We need to create emotional boundaries that keep out these critical messages.**

### In Our Next Session

In our next session, we'll learn some practices for fostering self-compassion. Remember that the practice of love starts with loving ourselves, so we need to begin by attending to our own pain and suffering—including the pain of the Love Wound—with great compassion.

**In the meantime—between now and then, I encourage you to practice the following:**

1. Continue your daily presence practice—both a period of silence, solitude, and stillness in the morning and your practice of stillness in motion through the day.
2. Start your day with a morning intention to love. You might want to recite a daily intention in the form of a prayer as in the dedication to love prayer we have been using at the end of our sessions.
3. Inquire deeply into your experience with a kind, curious eye, especially if you're in pain. Ask, "what is this?" and affirm, "this is sacred." Continue to let go of judgments as they arise.
4. Explore in your reflections your barriers to self-compassion. You can do this by journaling or exploring self-compassion with a friend. How does your Love Wound prevent you from experiencing self-compassion? What are your barriers to self-compassion? How do they operate in your life? What impact do they have on you?

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5. Think about an issue that you often criticize yourself about. It could be your social skills, your work ability, your study habits, your tidiness, your appearance, or something else. What do you normally say to yourself, and what tone of voice do you use? Now, imagine what you would say to a close friend who is struggling with the same issue. Then, imagine what you would say to a young child. What tone of voice would you use? Note the differences.

6. Think about people you know who are compassionate. You may know them personally or they may be famous people. Think about their qualities. Are they weak and self-pitying? Or are they kind, generous, strong, and caring?

7. Experiment with having self-compassionate days alternating with self-critical days. Practice being kind and supportive to yourself for a day on your self-compassionate day. How does it feel compared to being harsh and critical with yourself? At the end of each day, note any positive or negative outcomes of the two different ways of being.

**Please take some time after our session today to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!**