

The Compassionate Caregiver

What is the Compassionate Caregiver?

Oftentimes we are a lot kinder to our kids than we are to ourselves. In fact, we can feel protective of our child when they themselves or others are giving them critical criticism. The Compassionate Caregiver technique helps you reverse that pattern by imagining what it would be like to treat yourself with the same kindness, understanding, and empathy you would naturally give to your child.

While it can be incredibly difficult to show ourselves grace when we make mistakes, our protective instincts for our loved ones are often much more accessible. By externalizing your own pain and imagining it within someone you deeply care for, you create a pathway to access your innate empathy, effectively allowing you to become your own parent.

Case Example: “I am a failure”

Sophia, a mom of two children, shared that she had been struggling with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and self-consciousness. She decided to start a side business, and after a month she realizes that she is net negative in how much she is making. She tells herself critical thoughts like “I am a failure”.

During a compassion-based roleplay, the therapist played the role of one of Sophia's children who was experiencing the exact same situation and struggling with feelings of inadequacy, guilt and self consciousness.

- **Therapist (as Sophia's Child):** Mom, when things are difficult I always turn to you because you always know just the right thing to say to help me feel better. I just started a side business and it is not doing too well. In fact I am in the negative. I really think “I’m a failure.” Don’t you think that’s true?
- **Sophia:** No, not at all. I am so proud of you that you tried something new! It is so brave of you to start your own business. And you are doing it so carefully too. You are continuing to work your main job while doing this on the side to test it. It is so hardworking and responsible of you. I could not be any prouder of you. With anything in life it will be hard and we will make mistakes. Like riding a bike you just have to get back on and keep trying and learn from those mistakes. It is only one month in. I am sure you have a lot you can learn from this.

- **Therapist (as Sophia's Child):** You always know just the right thing to say to help me feel better. But are you just saying it to be nice and because you are my mom, or do you actually believe it?
- **Sophia:** Yes, and I really believe it. You are not a failure! I believe in you.
- **Therapist:** If that's true for your child, could it also be true for you?
- **Sophia:** Yes, I have to be. I want to be a good example for my kids. I believe this and in the future they will believe this too. I want to foster resilience for them.

After the exercise, Sophia noticed a significant decrease in her negative feelings. She recognized that she intentionally speaks to her children with encouragement because she believes it is essential for their success. Ultimately, she realized that to foster her own success, she needs to step into the role of her own mother and speak to herself with that same compassion.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Identify a negative thought running through your mind. Write it down:

Step 2. Pinpoint the specific emotions driving this thought (e.g., guilt, inadequacy, fear, shame).

Step 3. Imagine you have a child who is exactly like you, experiencing the same situation and expressing the thought you just wrote down. (Note: If you do not have children, imagine a beloved younger relative, pet, or even a younger version of yourself)

Step 4. Visualize their face and notice the protective, caring instincts that naturally arise within you.

Step 5. Write down how you would respond to your child. What specific words of comfort, evidence, and encouragement would you offer them?

Step 6. Ask yourself: Do I believe what I wrote in Step 5? Why or why not?

Step 7. Finally, ask: *If this is true for my child, could it also be true for me? Why or why not?*

Step 8. Reflect on the double standard. Consider what it costs you emotionally to be so much harder on yourself than you are on those you love.

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- If you find that you don't believe what you wrote, or if it feels true for your child but not for yourself, pause and reflect on why. There may be good reasons you continue holding onto the negative thought.
- In some cases, people are just as harsh or even harsher to their child as they are to themselves. In those situations, this technique may not work as intended
- Sometimes this technique may not be the right fit for you. Another approach might be more helpful in addressing your specific situation.
- If the technique does work, try practicing it again with a different negative thought. The more you repeat it, the more natural self-compassion can become.

Final Note

The Compassionate Caregiver allows you to be your own parent, giving you the space to treat yourself with kindness, love, and respect. True self-esteem isn't about achieving perfection; it is about learning to embrace your flaws, mistakes, and vulnerabilities with the same unconditional support you naturally extend to those you care about most. Whether this process leads to an immediate emotional shift or simply highlights the severity of your inner critic, it is a crucial step toward building lifelong resilience.