

Psoriasis and self-compassion



Contents

What is self-compassion?1
Why is self-compassion important?2
How can I increase my self-compassion?4
Overcoming common barriers to self-compassion6
Cheat sheet for self-compassion8

What is self-compassion?

Compassion can be defined as:



Self-compassion is having sensitivity to your own suffering (e.g., feeling distressed, finding things difficult) and wanting to do helpful things to relieve this. What's key is that self-compassion is about approaching yourself and your problems with warmth and caring.

We can think about three different aspects of self-compassion:



Self-kindness

Being kind and supportive of yourself rather than judging yourself negatively when things go wrong for you and when you feel distressed.



Common humanity

Understanding that having problems and feeling distressed is a normal part of human life rather than feeling isolated by your problems and feelings.



Mindfulness

Being able to hold your distressing thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness, rather than being overwhelmed by them.

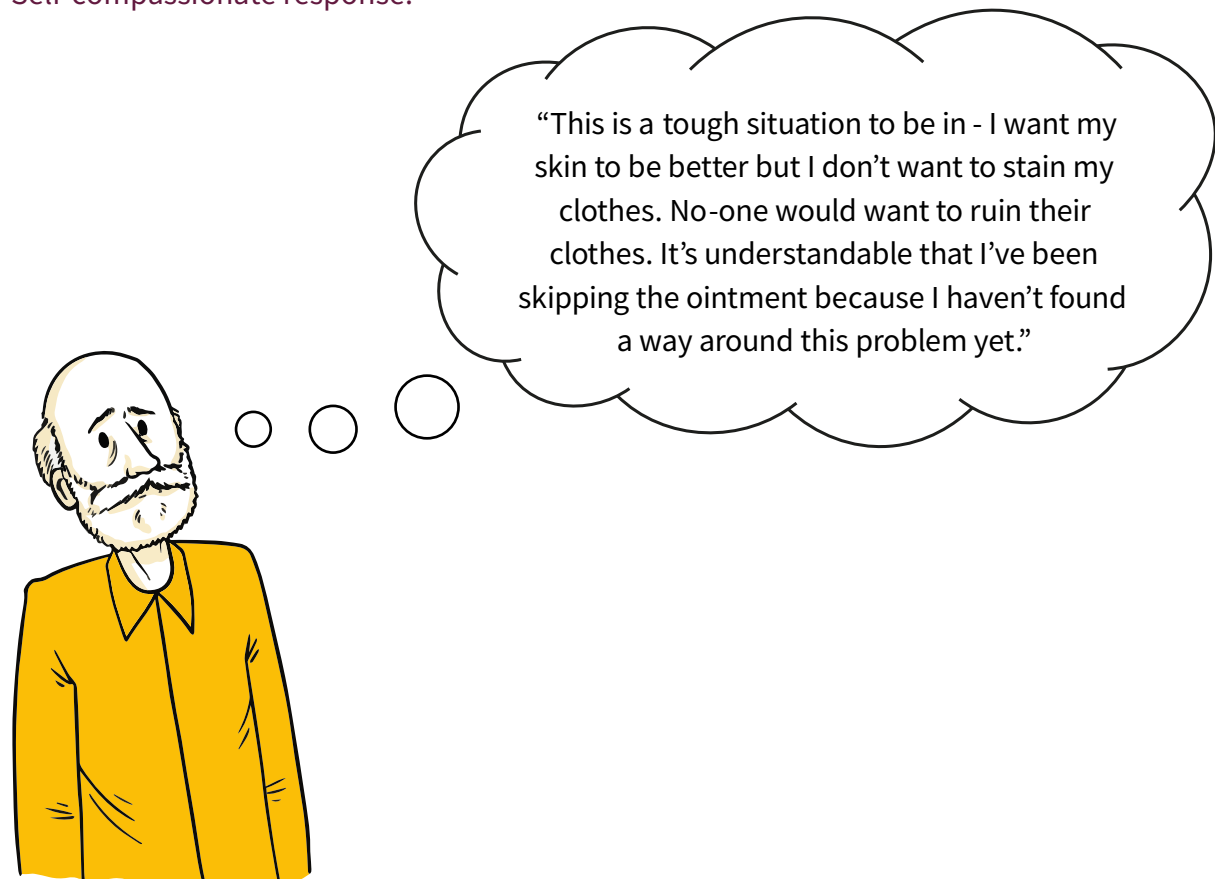
What does self-compassion look like in practice?

Example: Imagine you haven't been using your prescribed psoriasis ointment lately because it stains your clothes, and now your skin has flared up.

Unhelpful response:



Self-compassionate response:



Why is self-compassion important?

Self-compassion has lots of benefits. Being self-compassionate:



- is linked with better mental health - less anxiety and depression
- soothes us when we're feeling stressed or upset - it activates the part of our nervous system that reduces stress hormones and increases feel-good hormones
- helps us switch off from worries and feel relaxed
- is linked with better management of health, e.g., healthy eating, physical activity and use of prescribed medications.

Self-compassion is especially important for people with long-term conditions, like psoriasis, because these can negatively affect life in lots of ways and lead to suffering- so there is a more frequent need to be self-compassionate. For example, getting an unwanted comment about your skin from someone can leave you feeling upset but self-compassion can help you feel better.

“Psoriasis is multifaceted. It’s a physical condition but probably the greatest impact is the mental health side of things.”

Pete, 37, who has chronic plaque psoriasis



Sometimes the psoriasis treatment(s) can also be a source of difficulty. For example, topical treatments can be challenging to use because of issues such as mess/staining, having an unpleasant smell or texture, being time-consuming or interfering with other activities. These challenges may reduce how much people use their prescribed treatments, which may inadvertently worsen their psoriasis. However, adopting a self-compassionate approach can help people work towards their health goals despite the challenges they experience.

“Sometimes [putting creams and moisturisers on is] a bit of a pain, but I’ve just got used to doing it as part of a routine. Sometimes if you’re rushing in the morning, [if] I’m late I might not bother ... but if I do that, I then just put them on in the evening.”

Steve, 40, who has chronic plaque psoriasis

Step 2: Practising

The next step is to practise adopting a compassionate mindset. We can do this with just a little bit of time and our imaginations.

The following exercises will help build your self-compassion. You'll get the most benefit from them if you practise regularly, for example, for a few minutes each day. It's best if you do these exercises somewhere quiet, where you won't be disturbed.

Exercise A: Imagining receiving compassion



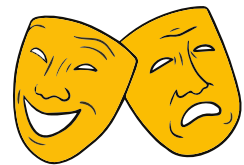
Think of an area of your life where you are having some difficulty. Imagine being with someone who is being compassionate to you about whatever difficulty you are having. This could be someone you know, someone from the media or history, or an entirely imagined person- whatever works for you is fine. This person is wise and strong- they know what is best for you and they are completely committed to

wanting to help you. They understand that life can be full of difficulties and suffering and they have a heartfelt wish that you will be able to cope with and overcome whatever suffering you are facing. Just spend 30 seconds imagining receiving this deep, heartfelt wish of compassion being sent to you.

Notice how you feel. You may feel a little calmer or less tense. You might feel a bit emotional or even resistant to receiving compassion. Whatever comes up for you, just notice that. Your compassionate image understands that receiving compassion can feel difficult but they still have the heartfelt wish that you overcome whatever difficulties you are facing.

Exercise B: Embodying self-compassion

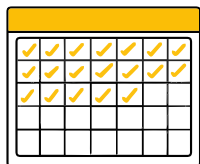
Start to imagine what you would be like at your most self-compassionate. What facial expressions would you use? What would your posture be like? What would your tone of voice be? How would you respond to problems? Try to practise these in the same way that an actor would 'get into character'. Spend a few minutes trying to really feel what it is like to be this compassionate self.



Remember, we all have compassionate sides of ourselves, just as we all have angry and anxious sides, and we can choose to build up our compassionate self so that we use it more.

Note. These exercises are also available as part of the audio guided practices 'Compassionate Image and Compassionate Community' and 'Building the Compassionate Self' at <https://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resource/audio>.

Practising these exercises for a few minutes a day can help our minds and bodies feel soothed and more contented. It's okay if they feel strange or difficult at first- they will get easier with practice. Once you've got the hang of them, you'll be better able to use this compassionate mindset when faced with problems in your day-to-day life.



It can be hard to adopt a new habit- we might forget, or other things just get in the way. Decide when would be best for you to practise these compassion exercises. The following ideas may also help:

- Use something you already do regularly as a prompt, e.g., you could plan to do these exercises when you are waiting for your skin cream to soak in or when you are boiling the kettle to make a drink.
- Create a reminder for yourself if you need one (e.g., a note or alarm).
- Make sure you have this leaflet to hand while you are learning the exercises.
- Remind yourself why you want to build your self-compassion at times when it feels hard, e.g., “self-compassion will help me feel better”.

My plan (optional)

When I (e.g., get out of bed) _____
then I'll practise the self-compassion exercises.

If I am tempted not to practise, I'll remind myself that _____

Overcoming common barriers to self-compassion

Learning to be self-compassionate can be challenging. Here we have listed some common concerns about trying to be self-compassionate and ideas to overcome these.



I don't have time- this is just another thing I have to do!

Sometimes life can feel so busy that it would be impossible to fit something else in. Self-compassion is an attitude towards yourself though, not a particular set of actions, so you can be self-compassionate while going about your daily life. It is helpful to spend time practising the above exercises, especially if you are new to self-compassion, but just a few minutes a day will build your ability to be self-compassionate. Use the exercises in a way that works for you.



My psoriasis is too bad, my treatment isn't working well.

When you are suffering is exactly when self-compassion is most helpful. You don't have to wait until things are going well to be caring towards yourself. Self-compassion isn't necessarily about doing things differently, it can be about how you do things and the way you approach yourself in difficult times. Seek further support (see box) if you need to.



I'm too stressed or unhappy.

When we feel stressed, anxious or low, it's easy to become self-critical (sometimes about the way we are feeling), but this makes us feel even worse- it makes our bodies produce more stress hormones. It's normal to have unpleasant emotions at times- let yourself feel how you feel. If you find yourself being self-critical, try to just notice that and then go back to using your self-compassionate mindset. Seek further support (see box) if you need to.



I feel like I'm not worth the effort.

Sometimes we can feel so down about ourselves that we think we don't deserve good things or to feel better. This is a type of self-criticism and is unhelpful. Try to extend the same care and support to yourself that you would to a good friend or a loved one. If energy or motivation is a problem, try making very small changes only. If you think you might be depressed, see your GP to discuss what might help.



I don't think self-compassion will help me.

Self-compassion can take many forms- it isn't just about being 'nice' to yourself. It also involves taking action and changing things that are causing you suffering. For example, if your psoriasis treatment isn't working for you, a self-compassionate thing to do would be to prepare for your next doctor's appointment so that you get the most out of it. (Note: advice on preparing for appointments is available from the Psoriasis Association- see box.) Self-compassion might also include making time to look after yourself

Further support.

We all need support at times. If you need more support with your psoriasis, think about where you could seek this. Is it from friends and family, health services, or other people with psoriasis? It's okay to seek further help from your GP or healthcare professional if you need to- it's not "just" skin. The Psoriasis Association also offer information and support. <https://www.psoriasis-association.org.uk/> Tel: 01604 251 620

If you need more support with self-compassion, could you ask a trusted friend or family member to help you with this? There are also free exercises and resources available at www.compassionatemind.co.uk/ and <https://self-compassion.org/>. There are many self-help books on self-compassion available too- ask at your library. See your GP if you think that you would benefit from talking to a therapist as they may refer you for this.

(e.g., apply topical treatments) and seeking further support as needed. Everyone can benefit from self-compassion in one way or another.



I worry what would happen if I wasn't self-critical.

Sometimes we can be in a habit of being self-critical and worry that if we didn't do this, we wouldn't have a way of keeping ourselves in check- we might think that self-criticism motivates us or keeps us humble. For example, you might think that if you didn't criticise yourself, you wouldn't use your psoriasis treatment. But of course, you can use your treatment simply because you want to look after yourself- it is possible to take action without being harshly self-critical. A simple way to test this out is to see what happens on days when you try to be particularly self-compassionate compared to days when you don't. Consider trying this and see what happens.

We hope that this leaflet has been helpful to start your journey to being more self-compassionate. Good luck!

Cheat sheet for self-compassion



What would you say to a good friend in the same situation? How would you treat them?



How can you best look after yourself right now?



Take two minutes to slow and deepen your breathing.



Imagine being with someone (or something) that helps you feel safe and soothed.



If you had to act like the most compassionate person imaginable, what would you be doing differently right now? How would that make you feel?



Be patient with yourself. It takes time to learn new ways of relating to yourself. Don't beat yourself up for being self-critical!

**Sheffield
Hallam
University**

Centre for Behavioural
Science and Applied
Psychology



This self-help leaflet was created by Elaine N. Clarke and Rachael J. Thorneloe from the Centre for Behavioural Science and Applied Psychology at Sheffield Hallam University and members of the public who participated in co-design workshops (2024). Thanks to Steve Loft for his contribution. Further information about the content and reference sources is available on request from cbsap@shu.ac.uk. Illustration by Liam Callebout, www.liamraphael.co.uk. Funding was provided by the Cecil King Memorial Award via the Psoriasis Association. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.