

HIGH SCHOOL

CHAPTER 6

Compassion for Self and Others

Overview

Teenage students are undergoing rapid and at times seemingly uneven development. This makes for a time of great opportunity, and also potentially great stress. While 95% of brain structure has been developed within the first six or so years of life, the stage of adolescence sees further growth and reorganization of the prefrontal cortex. This part of the brain is associated with reasoning, impulse control, and decision-making. While this development allows for greater perspective taking and consideration of others, it is also associated with greater emotional reactivity and risk taking. As students' social identities mature, their relationship circle expands to include their peers as well. With this can come a fear of social rejection and social isolation, and a heightened susceptibility to peer influence and social comparisons. As a result, a high number of students at this age struggle with anxiety about academics, body image, and other pressures. Other issues such as social anxiety, self-esteem and self-worth can become very impactful for teenagers.

Adolescence is also a particularly important time for identity formation. A central part of identity formation is how we relate to ourselves and how we view ourselves: our self-concept. Do we treat ourselves with kindness, understanding, and compassion? Are teenagers aware of their limitations but also aware of their capabilities and the fact that we are always growing and changing? Or do they look on at their current state with frustration, impatience, and disappointment, comparing themselves unfavorably to others and to the idealized images presented in society and on social media? This time of development is therefore a crucial stage. Despite the challenges they face, students at this age have greater resources for caring for themselves and others than at any time before in their lives. It is therefore an especially opportune time to explore empathy, forgiveness, compassion, and self-compassion with them. This is the focus of Chapter 6.

In *Building Resilience from the Inside Out*, Linda Lantieri writes, "Adolescents no longer inhabit a world defined by grownups, but rather one defined by their peers. While they push us away, they in fact still need the guidance and understanding of the significant adults in their lives to help them navigate this tumultuous time. Young people also need time for self-reflection and to turn inward in order to define their own sense of meaning and purpose for their life, yearnings which are inherent in this developmental stage."¹

What is Self-Compassion?

Psychologist Dr. Kristin Neff, one of the world's leading experts on the topic, writes that self-compassion means being "kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings."²

¹ Lantieri, *Building Resilience from the Inside Out: A Teaching Guide for Grades K-8*.

² <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2>

In SEE Learning, self-compassion has two critical components. The first is self-acceptance, which, as Dr. Neff notes, involves being kind and understanding to oneself when one encounters setbacks, difficulties, or failures, or when we do not live up to our own or others' expectations. The second is the confidence and courage that one can bring about inner change that can facilitate greater personal happiness and opportunities for flourishing. Both elements, and especially the second, benefit from critical thinking. For example, if a student has internalized the idea that they have to be the best at everything in order to feel happy and accepted, or that they could never be happy unless others found them more physically attractive, self-compassion would involve recognizing that these attitudes are untrue and unhelpful, and feeling empowered to be able to shift to more productive and constructive attitudes. Both external and internal environments affect the well-being of students and their ability to flourish personally and academically. Yet students often have less choice regarding their external environment (such as location, school, family situation, and so on) than their internal one, especially once they cultivate a greater ability to observe their mind, direct their attention, regulate their nervous system, and navigate emotions. Teaching students that they can cultivate self-acceptance, self-compassion, patience, and perseverance can be empowering. When combined with practical skills, these internal messages can bolster their resilience and enhance self-efficacy as they move through the evolving external environments they encounter.

Self-Compassion as a Developed Skill and Approach to Life

Students that embody self-compassion are capable of putting into practice the following personal insights:

1. Accepting our limitations and imperfections as parts of the shared human experience.
2. Making visible our strengths and fortunate circumstances by understanding that we are more than any one mistake.
3. Understanding that each outcome in life is dependent on multiple conditions and no one has full control over all those conditions.
4. Seeing our mistakes and failures as opportunities for growth.
5. Guided by a sense of purpose and not by comparison to others.
6. Determining one's core values by distinguishing between our wants and needs.
7. Finding confidence in our choices and personal self-agency.

What is Compassion?

Dr. Thupten Jinpa, a noted scholar on compassion, defines compassion as “a sense of concern that arises when we are confronted with another person’s suffering and feel motivated to see that suffering relieved.”³ Compassion depends on awareness of the other’s situation and an ability to empathize with them, combined with a sense of affection or endearment towards that person, at even the most basic level of human connection.

These insights are cultivated as students engage in the learning experiences that are summarized below.

Learning Experience 1, “Exploring Self-Compassion,” introduces the concept of self-care and self-compassion. To generate interest and motivation for the exploration of self-compassion, students will discover (a) what self-compassion is and why it is beneficial; (b) how students are already exhibiting self-compassion; and (c) areas where students feel their self-compassion can grow. Students will explore internal (their own minds, attitudes, perspectives and emotions) and external factors that contribute to self-compassion.

Learning Experience 2, “Practicing Self-Compassion,” enables students to reflect on their current use of self-compassion. It also asks them to explore how to collectively evaluate common barriers to self-compassion. Through the learning experience, students identify ways to overcome the barriers to self-compassion. Finally, students will make plans to take actionable steps to practice self-compassion in the near future.

Learning Experience 3, “Exploring Attitudes and Expectations,” enables students to examine the attitudes and ideas they have about themselves and others. Students will engage in an analysis of how different messages within their culture or society shape their attitudes and ideas about what happiness is or should be. This learning experience allows students to examine how they turn those attitudes and ideas on themselves. Self-compassion helps students to accept our shortcomings or failures as a normal part of the human experience and an opportunity for growth. Students can also learn to accept that not everything is within their control. Sometimes, even with the best efforts students may not achieve what they had hoped for. There may be things beyond them that contribute to this reality. When students exercise self-compassion they can set expectations for themselves out of a desire to be healthy and flourishing rather than from a place of self-criticism

³ Jinpa, Thupten. *A Fearless Heart: How the courage to be compassionate can transform our lives* (Avery, 2016).

Learning Experience 4, “Exploring Forgiveness,” begins with students defining and establishing the personal benefits of forgiveness by examining the science of forgiveness and the impacts it has on our physiology. Students participate in insight activities that are grounded in the personal experiences that students have with forgiveness. Students will examine how to practice forgiveness without necessarily approving of the action that led to harm. Students will define and reflect on experiences they may have had in which they let go of anger and negative emotions towards others and themselves. Finally, students will develop a classroom and personal plan to relate with forgiveness towards themselves and others.

Learning Experience 5, “Practicing Forgiveness,” allows students to engage in the practice of forgiveness as they apply strategies for forgiveness to themselves and others. Students will construct examples that identify how forgiveness is and can be applied. Students will create a personal plan to engage in the practice of forgiveness.

Learning Experience 6, “The Science of Compassion,” engages students in an examination of the science of compassion. Students will explore the benefits of compassion for themselves and others. Students will develop insights into how compassion can be practiced towards oneself and others.

Learning Experience 7, “Exploring Active Compassion,” asks students to explore more deeply the concept of active compassion, which involves taking responsibility for another and acting to protect them. This two-part lesson engages students in developing an understanding of compassion based on examples from their life. In the second part of the learning experience, students will create a Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan (WOOP) statement to identify where they can cultivate acts of compassion in their own lives.

Learning Experience 8, “Applying Compassion to One’s Life,” encourages students to apply compassion to their own lives through student-constructed examples. Through these insights, students will gain experience with the three main components of active compassion: having affection for someone, understanding their needs and wants, and taking responsibility to help them. They will also explore how active compassion needs to be coupled with critical thinking, systems thinking, and ethics. Students will also examine the need to sometimes say no in order to set personal and social boundaries.

Student Personal Practice

Many of the skills and practices that have been taught in SEE Learning are actually practices of self-compassion and compassion for others. For example, the resilience skills of grounding, resourcing and Help Now! Strategies in Chapter 2 are practices of self-compassion. Navigating one's emotions can also be a practice of self-compassion, as is forgiveness, since it releases one from strong negative emotions that disturb one's happiness and peace of mind. Similarly, mindful listening and paying attention to others can be acts of compassion and kindness. By pointing out the skills students are already developing and naming them as acts of self-compassion and compassion, you can help your students to recognize how they are already practicing self-compassion and compassion for others. This builds a strong foundation, helping them find ways to explore the more complex material presented in this chapter, giving them opportunities to reflect on how their expectations and attitudes contribute to or hinder their flourishing and well-being.

Teacher Personal Practice

The expectations on educators, and those that educators place on themselves, can sometimes be extraordinarily high. The facilitation of learning experiences on the topics of forgiveness, self-compassion, and compassion for others is greatly aided by educators who have cultivated personal insights and applied practices in those areas. You may wish to take this time to explore your own self-talk. When do you encourage yourself and when do you notice instances of negative self-talk? Are there unrealistic expectations that you place on yourself or your students, and if so, how could you make them more healthy and do-able? What practices of self-compassion and compassion for others are you already engaged in, and how could you build on these, practicing them more, or adding to them?

Many of the learning experiences in Chapter 6 involve small group and whole group discussions on topics and concepts related to self-compassion. Helping students to cultivate self-compassion and compassion for others requires much more than having them memorize a list of strategies. How a teacher models and embodies self-compassion through forgiveness and compassion for others through their actions does a great deal to create a compassionate classroom culture and to reinforce essential SEE Learning competencies.

Further Reading and Resources

- *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, by Dr. Kristen Neff (William Morrow, 2015)
- *A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives*, by Dr. Thupten Jinpa (Avery, 2016)

Chapter 6: Compassion for Self and Others

Learning Experience 1: Exploring Self-Compassion

Learning Experience 2: Practicing Self-Compassion

Learning Experience 3: Exploring Attitudes and Expectations

Learning Experience 4: Exploring Forgiveness

Learning Experience 5: Practicing Forgiveness

Learning Experience 6: The Science of Compassion

Learning Experience 7: Exploring Active Compassion

Learning Experience 8: Applying Compassion to One's Life