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The Mindful Path to Self-compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions by Christopher Germer (review)

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The Mindful Path to Self-compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions

Written By: Dr. Christopher K. Germer, PhD
Publisher: The Guilford Press, 305 pages

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Compassion, self-compassion, and mindfulness have long been spiritual practices of Buddhism and Buddhist psychology. Remnants of mindfulness and stress reduction techniques have existed in the United States and evidence of such practices is apparent dating back to the 1970's, but it has not been until that past 10 years that self-compassion and mindfulness have been more thoroughly considered, examined, and researched. Much of this increased interest is credited to Dr. Kristen Neff's research and work on self-compassion and its role in reducing negative thoughts and feelings (i.e., depression, anxiety, self-criticism) and in increasing positive qualities (i.e., forgiveness, better outlook on life) amongst those who practice and integrate it into their lives. Further, with the awareness and accessibility of self-compassion and mindfulness, professionals and the individuals served by them are recognizing the implicit value these skills have and of the ways such techniques can improve their lives.

The book begins by explaining people's tendency to resist, suppress, or escape their emotional and mental pain. The author, Dr. Christopher Germer, helps the reader understand that by doing so, people actually create more personal, mental, and emotional pain for themselves. More specifically, he lays out in an easy-to-understand equation that pain compounded by resistance equates to more suffering (p. 15). While experiencing pain is a part of the human experience, Germer (2009) explains that "suffering is optional" (p. 16), meaning that people do not need to compound their experiences and make them worse. Rather than resist our pain, the author indicates that the antidote is to turn toward and face the pain so that people can kindly look at it and care for themselves in a more loving way. Two components of doing so involve the use of self-compassion and mindfulness.

Self-compassion is a concept and practice that many find initially challenging, particularly within the United States. It is sometimes perceived as something that people do if they are "weak" or "lazy" as it may be viewed by some as not holding one's self accountable or responsible. However, such beliefs couldn't be further from the truth. In the U.S., people are more likely to extend compassion to others, but many are challenged in their ability to be tolerant, kind, forgiving, and accepting of themselves when they are in pain. Despite this apparent discrepancy, self-compassion is a skill and an approach to life that can benefit the individual. Further, Germer (2009) explains the circular relationship of self-compassion and compassion. More specifically, he informs the reader that people who are self-compassionate tend to have more compassion for others going through difficult times and that one does not exclude the other. Throughout the book, the author encourages people to explore and discover techniques and mantras that work for them in their quest to develop and increase self-compassion. Germer (2009) clearly stresses that there is no one right way to develop and enhance self-compassion and that a part of the journey is to

discover what works for each individual. Further, he provides guidance in how to start with one's development of self-compassion and then gradually extend it to others (i.e., benefactor, friend, neutral person, difficult person, and groups; pp. 166-178).

One important element of self-compassion is that it does not have to be innate. Instead, people can learn about and develop it regardless of their initial starting point. Although the exact ways people learn to do that may vary, the author discusses the role of mindfulness and the importance of learning to "anchor" or "quiet" one's mind and body. This quieting process helps people learn to "tune in" to themselves, their inner experiences, their breathing, and their personal pain. Throughout this process, people may learn to meditate, but again, the focus is more on creating a stillness within so that people can pay attention to their mind, body, soul, and inner experiences. This process helps people learn about themselves and identify parts that need their love, care, and tender affection. Mindfulness practices and techniques can aid in helping people focus on their experiences, needs, and on "opening" their awareness to tend and respond to the difficulties and challenges experienced (p. 81).

Throughout, the author provides the reader with a number of applications and exercises which can be explored and tried while one is working on the cultivation of self-compassion. One such exercise is the opportunity to explore and learn about one's ability to be self-compassionate. The reader is directed to Dr. Kristen Neff's website: www.self-compassion.org to complete this exercise. On her website, Neff has the self-compassion scale she developed as a part of her research and people are provided the opportunity to complete the scale and learn about their ability to practice and integrate self-compassion in their lives. Toward the end of the book, the reader is again encouraged to revisit and retake the scale to determine if one has improved their ability to be kind and loving toward themselves.

Another important element for professionals to consider are the barriers and personality styles of each person trying to practice self-compassion. In Chapter 8, several personality styles (i.e., caregiver, intellectual, perfectionist, workhorse) are discussed along with an introduction to the potential stumbling blocks associated with each type. Such information is of value because each person has a different personality and set of circumstances that either aid or hinder the self-compassion cultivation process. Learning about and being provided with the opportunity to identify which of these apply to one's own situation enhances understanding of what might be expected throughout the process.

A final point worthy of mention and relevance to professionals is the illustration of personal and professional stories and examples combined with a number of applied experiences. Additionally, the latter portion of the book provides the reader with insights about how to measure one's own progress in practicing and developing self-compassion as well as additional exercises and resources to read should one want to further their ability to be more self-compassionate and to learn about self-compassion.

Professionals wanting to learn more or to integrate self-compassion as a part of their personal or professional practice are encouraged to consider this book. As stated earlier, the development and cultivation of self-compassion and mindfulness does not require a person to be an expert, but it is a process that can be steadily practiced and improved. Further, the better professionals understand the value it has in their own life, the more comfortable they may feel in using it with their clients and with the people they serve. For some, this process will be easier than for others, but Germer (2009) explains that the practice of self-compassion should not be hard or difficult; rather, it is when we "resist" it or the process of letting thoughts and feelings flow and be what they are that people tend to get stuck in the process of trying to control or effect the outcome.

Dr. Susan Stuntzner PhD, LPC, LMHP, CRC, NCC, DCC, BCPC, DAPA, FAPA is an Assistant Professor in the School of Rehabilitation Services and Counseling at the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley. She currently trains students to become rehabilitation and rehabilitation counseling professionals and to work directly with individuals with disabilities in numerous employment settings. Her research interests include: adaptation and coping with disability, resiliency, self-compassion and compassion, forgiveness and spirituality, development of intervention techniques and strategies, and mentorship of professionals with disabilities. She has written three books pertaining to coping and adaptation and/or resilience-based skills. Her works are entitled, *Living with a Disability: Finding Peace Amidst the Storm*, *Reflections from the Past: Life Lessons for Better Living*, and *Resiliency and Coping: The Family After*. Dr. Stuntzner has researched and written articles on self-compassion and forgiveness and their potential relationship to the needs of individuals with disabilities. She has also developed two interventions (i.e., resilience, forgiveness) for persons with disabilities to assist them in their coping process. These works are entitled, “Stuntzner and Hartley’s Life Enhancement Intervention: Developing Resiliency Skills Following Disability” and “Stuntzner’s Forgiveness Intervention: Learning to Forgive Yourself and Others”. Additional information can be found on her website: www.therapeutic-healing-disability.com