

Five tips to implement self-compassion for healthcare workers

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Self-compassion is not a cure-all for systemic challenges within the health system, but it can enhance resilience, social support, and self-efficacy among healthcare workers, ultimately improving their quality of life in the workforce

Self-compassion has become a concept that serves as a buffer against stress and promotes resilience and emotional wellbeing. Often considered a type of mindfulness, which focuses on accepting our experience, self-compassion goes beyond accepting our situation and includes an added dimension – embracing the experiencer (i.e., ourselves) with warmth and tenderness when our experience is painful ([Neff, 2015](#)).

Self-compassion is a particularly useful strategy to address burnout for healthcare workers. [De Hert \(2020\)](#) defines burnout as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion that can impact an individual's wellbeing and professional performance. [De Hert's \(2020\)](#) research found a high prevalence of burnout contributed to serious safety concerns for workers, patients, and organisations and affected 40% of nurses, 50% of physicians, and 60% of medical students. Key recommendations include promoting work-life balance, effective training programmes, fostering a supportive culture and offering resources and support systems to manage stress and workload.

Self-compassion is by no means a panacea for high workloads and systems failures, and this article acknowledges the limitations of such factors. Self-compassion can, however, foster resilience, social support, and self-efficacy for and with healthcare workers to significantly enhance their quality of life while remaining in the workforce ([Collins, 2021](#)).

The following five tips may resonate with readers and start a conversation with fellow co-workers who are struggling with the effects of potential burnout.

Tip Number 1: STOP feeling sorry for yourself

Self-compassion is not about self-pity and ruminating with an inward focus on reliving a negative situation that may arise in our daily lives. Self-compassion is about avoiding tuning out the bad experience and leaning into those feelings by accepting, experiencing and acknowledge them with kindness. Kindness in this context helps us process and let go of the emotion by viewing it as part of the human condition. Rather than getting consumed by thoughts of self-pity and how bad things are, people who practice self-compassion experience a high level of mental health and wellbeing. For example, instead of thinking that I really messed up or can't believe I said that I'm such a bad person – it's

healthier to say when I got mad at them I was stressed and can overreact sometimes. Seeing beyond self-judgment can help us keep in touch with all of our self (good and bad), which provides encouragement to do our best and try again.

Tip Number 2: Self-compassion is not a form of weakness

Practising self-compassion is key to coping with life events and ensures ongoing resilience. Trying to tough it out as a response to life events and not admitting how much pain we are experiencing can contribute to physical and mental ill-health. Research by [Steen et al. \(2021\)](#) found that self-compassion was beneficial for military veterans who experienced post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and it contributes to positive outcomes years after experiencing combat. Using self-compassion and forgiving ourselves is part of the process as the body releases feel-good hormones, which, in turn, returns us to a sense of calmness and clarity in our thoughts and actions. When we truly care for ourselves, our heart opens up, and we engage our capacity for love, wisdom, courage and generosity.

Tip Number 3: Stop feeling defeated

Ironically, believing that if we don't criticise ourselves constantly means we will become defeated about life in general. Self-compassion involves an honest recognition of failure and encouraging positive self-talk to move beyond the negative response to a confronting situation. Sometimes, assuming that anxiety, depression and stress are the result of not trying hard enough – is simply not true. Self-compassion is far more effective for motivation than self-punishment and strengthens personal accountability rather than evades it. Research by [Othman et al. \(2022\)](#) found that parents who engaged in self-compassion education were able to deal more positively with the daily demands of parenting. Feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted were decreased, and parents reported lower levels of anxiety and distress once the education programmes and workshops were completed.

Tip Number 4: Self-esteem is over-rated

While self-esteem is a positive evaluation of self-worth, self-compassion does not involve judgment or evaluation. When we fail or feel inadequate, self-compassion acknowledges that as humans we are imperfect and the messiness of being human is normal. Just like the sail on a boat, self-esteem changes according to our latest success or failure. Self-compassion is like the hull of the boat, a reliable source of support even when we feel hurt or our pride has taken a hit when praise has not been forthcoming. Self-compassionate people remain emotionally stable regardless of praise from others. Self-esteem depends on regular positive feedback and can contribute to episodes of emotional highs and lows, which are difficult to regulate.

Tip Number 5: Self-compassion helps sustain the act of caring for others

This is the main takeaway tip in this article. By practising self-compassion within us, we directly transmit this experience to those we provide service to. In other words, soothing ourselves creates inner peace, which translates to others being soothed as well. As human beings, exposure to other people's suffering creates an empathetic response in our brains, and we can experience personal distress as well. When we practice self-compassion, we create a buffer that allows us to appreciate and feel for the other person without becoming emotionally and physically drained in the process. Workplace bullying is a common response in healthcare services when workforce mental health and wellbeing are not addressed. Conflict resolution strategies and building resilience, such as self-compassion is an area still requiring attention, especially for new healthcare workers prior to graduation ([Simpson et al. 2022](#)).

In conclusion, there may be a perception that self-compassion is a form of selfishness and that those in the service of others must not put their emotional needs ahead of those of their patients or clients. Those who are focused on self-judgment have little left in their emotional cup to think about anything else, and attributing the label of selfishness is merely negative self-talk, convincing us that we must treat ourselves badly to treat others kindly. The badge of honour called a selfless healthcare worker is dated but still pervades the minds and spirits of those working within the health and human service industry today. Recognition of our common humanity is not a new concept. Accepting our flawed nature as human beings is a step towards remembering that we are not alone in our suffering, and it is time to forgive ourselves ([Wepa, 2020](#)).

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