

Self-Compassion & Chronic Illness

Self-compassion is being kind to oneself during moments of pain or suffering rather than being harshly self-critical. You can think of it like treating yourself how you would treat a close loved one if they were experiencing illness, injury or distress

Having self-compassion when we have a chronic illness means acknowledging that the symptoms and management of our condition takes up a lot of our energy, and it also means being kind to ourselves when we're struggling - whether that be physically due to symptoms and pain, or emotionally.

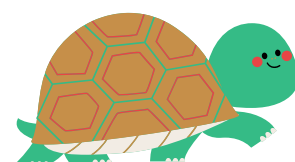
But sometimes treating ourselves with kindness can be really hard.

Why self-compassion often doesn't come naturally

- **Shame and guilt:** You might feel like you're a burden to other people if you have to rely on carers or pull out of plans at the last minute. You might be used to prioritising other people's needs above your own.
- **Feeling stuck or trapped by your condition:** You might feel helpless because you have little control over your illness or symptoms. An automatic response can be resentment or anger at your body for failing you.
- **Comparison with others:** Comparison is a natural, human response. If we compare ourselves to who we were before we got sick, or to other able-bodied people in our life, we can feel shameful or resentful for not being able to do all the things others can do.
- **Societal expectations:** When we get sick with a chronic illness it can be really difficult to shake those ingrained societal expectations of us and realise that we have worth outside our ability to work and pay taxes.
- **Stressors come with being unwell:** Worry about finances or strained relationships can mean we don't have as much emotional bandwidth for approaching ourselves with kindness.

The benefits of practicing self-compassion

- Lower mental distress
- Improved wellness
- Increased satisfaction with life
- Increased feelings of self-worth and autonomy
- Better ability to cope with stressful times and poor health

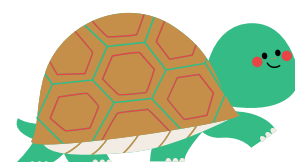


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- Better problem-solving ability
- Physiological improvements: better immune functioning, lower cortisol, higher heart rate variability, better sleep
- Improved interconnectedness and relationship satisfaction
- More likely to help and support others – and less caregiver fatigue and burnout

How can we cultivate self-compassion with a chronic illness?

- **See a therapist/counsellor/psychologist** who can help you work out barriers to self-compassion and teach you mindfulness and self-kindness skills
- **Loving Kindness meditations:** You can find pre-recorded versions online for free
- **Self-compassion letter writing:** Write yourself a kind letter validating your feelings or circumstances that you can read when you're feeling self-critical
- **Journaling:** Regular journaling has been shown to improve self-compassion
- **Other mindfulness meditations:** Breathwork, body scan etc.
- **Connect with others in the same boat:** Find peer support groups, peer mentors etc.
- **Ta-da lists (not to-do lists):** Write down all the things you accomplished at the end of each day, no matter how small
- **Label your inner critic:** Naming that inner voice that criticises you can help you get distance from those negative thoughts - e.g. "Gerald, stop being so mean today"
- **Schedule pleasant and fulfilling activities regularly**
- **Connect with something greater than yourself:** Join meaningful groups, spend time in nature, attend religious services, engage in your own spiritual practices, volunteer
- **Self-talk: Pretend your body or your emotions is like a young child you're looking after** - "I can see you're stressed and that's okay. What do you need? Don't worry, I'll look after you."
- **Self-talk: Validate yourself** - "It's no wonder I'm feeling unwell/tired/upset. I'm dealing with a lot right now. Anyone else in this situation would feel the same way. I'm doing a good enough job."
- **Self-talk: Check in with what you need** - "What does my body or mind need right now? What is one thing I could do that could help with my [pain/distress/fatigue]?"



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Arthritis, Pain Support & Emerge ACT have a number of services that can help you build your self-compassion muscle. These include:

- Support groups
- Trained volunteer peer mentors
- Self-management and pacing courses (Club Tortoise and our Self-Help Course)
- Counselling services
- Hobby groups (knitting, crochet and craft)
- Small group exercise classes
- Free online resources and talks about different aspects of living with a chronic illness

This information sheet was created using information from the following resources:

Baxter, R., & Sirois, F. M. (2025). Self-compassion and psychological distress in chronic illness: A meta-analysis. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 30(1), e12761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12761>

Brown, L., Karmakar, C., Flynn, M., Motin, M. A., Palaniswami, M., Celano, C. M., Huffman, J., & Bryant, C. (2019). A self-compassion group intervention for patients living with chronic medical illness: Treatment development and feasibility study. *Primary Care Companion for CNS Disorders*, 21(5). <https://doi.org/10.4088/PCC.19m02470>

Carvalho, S. A., Skvarc, D., Barbosa, R., Tavares, T., Santos, D., & Trindade, I. A. (2022). A pilot randomized controlled trial of online acceptance and commitment therapy versus compassion-focused therapy for chronic illness. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 29(2), 524-541. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2643>

Child Mind Institute Youtube video <https://youtu.be/nLPvyij0XMA?si=2Q1dhZ8tXEk64xmF>

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Los Angeles <https://cogbtherapy.com/cbt-blog/cognitive-defusion-techniques-and-exercises>

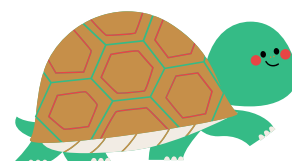
Dahmardeh, H., Sadooghiasl, A., Mohammadi, E., & Kazemnejad, A. (2021). The experiences of patients with multiple sclerosis of self-compassion: A qualitative content analysis. *Biomedicine (Taipei)*, 11(4), 35-42. <https://doi.org/10.37796/2211-8039.1211>

Neff, K. D. (2023). Self-compassion: Theory, method, research, and intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 74, 193-218. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031047>

Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/CPTSD_NSCCommunity/comments/1aq371i/got_any_tips_resource_building_self_compassion/

Sirois, F. M., Molnar, D. S., & Hirsch, J. K. (2015). Self-compassion, stress, and coping in the context of chronic illness. *Self and Identity*, 14(3), 334-347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2014.996249>

This factsheet is part of our Club Tortoise program for pacing with energy-limiting conditions.



For more information or help managing your condition:

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