

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Practicing Self-compassion to Achieve Your Goals | January 2021



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Practicing Self-Compassion to Achieve Your Goals

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many people to re-evaluate what is most important in life. For example, it may be good health, job security, close ties with family and friends, freedom of movement or feeling part of a collective whole (inter-connectedness).

The beginning of a new year is a good time to reflect on conditions that contribute to your personal sense of well-being and set reasonable goals that align with them. This may be a daunting challenge for those who feel they failed to meet expectations in 2020. Even in a

“normal” year with more predictable ups and downs, studies show only about 10 percent of Americans who make New Year’s resolutions keep them.

Chances of success are greater when you don’t overextend and instead take aim at a few reasonable, measurable goals. It’s also important to practice self-compassion, which studies show can change inner-thought patterns. When people are less self-critical and kinder to themselves, they are more likely to believe they can become re-engaged after inevitable setbacks.

Practicing Self-Compassion

To have self-compassion, you must be willing to turn inward and acknowledge suffering, which is a counterintuitive exercise, says [Kristin Neff](#), Ph.D., a leading authority on self-compassion and psychology professor at the University of Texas. Neff identifies self-compassion as:

Self-kindness vs. self-judgment: Recognize that failing is a productive and necessary part of life. Rather than talking to yourself in a critical tone, be gentle. Imperfection is a reality that cannot be denied or fought against. Accept perceived shortcomings with sympathy and kindness.

Common humanity vs. isolation: Acknowledge that perceived failures often lead to feeling isolated and as if you are the only one to have ever made a mistake. This tenet of self-compassion involves accepting feelings of inadequacy as part of a shared human experience.

Mindfulness vs. over-identification: Observe negative thoughts and emotions in a state of mindfulness. Be non-judgmental and receptive. Avoid “over-identifying” (the act of identifying to an excessive degree with someone or something else, especially to the detriment of individuality or objectivity). This practice helps put suffering into perspective and increases your ability to relate to others without making it about your own pain.

Here are some simple related exercises:

- **Be your friend:** Talk to yourself the same way you would to a friend going through a tough time.
- **Take daily self-compassion breaks:** [Try an auditory exercise](#) to focus on essential elements.
- **Curb critical self-talk:** Notice when you are being harsh, including negative words and tones.

Making Resolutions

When making resolutions, Martin Seligman, Ph.D., director of the [Positive Psychology Center](#) at the University of Pennsylvania, suggests choosing goals that make you feel alive and allow you to flourish.

He refers to these five elements of well-being:

- 1. Positive Emotions:** Cultivate gratitude and forgiveness to increase positive emotions about the past, present and future. If the path toward a resolution provides moments of positive emotion, you will be more inclined to stick with them.
- 2. Engagement:** When you apply your skills, strengths and close attention to a challenging task, you are creating an environment for “flow,” which allows you to become fully absorbed in the moment. When there is a clear goal in mind, you get the benefit of immediate feedback on progress. That’s why it’s important to set goals that increase your chances of experiencing flow and avoiding goals that don’t match your skills and strengths.
- 3. Relationships:** Connections with others give individual pursuits greater purpose and meaning. Positive relationships create a circle of social support when making and working toward goals and also help us hold ourselves accountable.
- 4. Meaning:** Belonging to or serving something that you believe is bigger than you are is a meaningful way to express gratitude. Ask yourself if your resolutions take into consideration the greater good, and if not, consider making some adjustments.
- 5. Accomplishment:** Define the reward you expect to receive when you reach your goal. Is it intrinsic, extrinsic or both? When you attain even part of a goal, don’t miss the opportunity to celebrate your accomplishment.

Ultimately, an honest self-appraisal is necessary to understand what truly brings meaning to your life, and if some aspects are weak or absent, identify ways they can be captured. Attaching a “why statement” to any resolution will help you stay motivated.

No matter what kind of resolutions you make, you will be more likely to succeed if you are prepared to veer from your original path and forgive yourself when you do.

Fear of Failure

Part of goal-setting is the ability to overcome normal fears of failure and accept that it’s sometimes necessary to take a leap of faith.

Fear of failure that stops someone from moving forward has many causes. For instance, it may stem from childhood, past traumatic events, personality traits (such as introversion) or regrets about mistakes that have had serious consequences.

If fear of failure is an issue for you, [MindTools](#) recommends:

- 1. Setting small goals that will help build your confidence**
- 2. Learning how to rationally evaluate possible outcomes**
- 3. Developing contingency plans if at first you don’t success**
- 4. Practicing positive thinking in all aspects of your life**

Some people have atychiphobia, a fear of failure which can cause crippling anxiety and serious physical symptoms. In those cases, it’s important to seek care from a mental health professional.