

# Does Self-Compassion Mean Letting Yourself Off the Hook?

By Kirsten Neff

A common stumbling block when thinking about self-compassion is the belief that it just means letting ourselves off the hook. When we say “it’s only human,” isn’t this just a way to blow off personal responsibility for our actions? But let’s look at this more closely.

First of all, isn’t it strange that admitting the fact that we’re flawed human beings is perceived as not being honest with ourselves? **Isn’t the honest truth that we are only human?** No matter how hard we try, we will mess up, fail, blow it, and step out of line. To believe that somehow that’s not the case, that if we were just to try a teeny-weeny bit harder perfection would be possible, is the real self-deception. Does this mean we should therefore just abandon all our efforts to be responsible and do the right thing? Of course not. **Admitting that we’re fallible human beings doing the best we can and being compassionate to ourselves in the face of our misdeeds, actually allows us to take more responsibility for our actions.**

Secondly, when we relate to ourselves kindly even when we’ve behaved badly, it’s safe to face the truth about ourselves. We don’t need to deny what we’ve done or distort the storyline so that we blame anyone other than ourselves for what happened. Mea culpa. I **can own up to it**, because even though my behavior might have been bad, that doesn’t mean that I AM BAD. **I can own up to what I’ve done without fear, because admitting responsibility doesn’t require throwing myself off the cliff of harsh self-condemnation.**

**Self-compassion means that we understand the myriad causes and conditions that lead us to act as we do.** Compassion is wise and sees through the illusion that we have total control over our actions. Compassion acknowledges the truth that we are limited, imperfect beings who are impacted by things over which we have no control — our genes, early family history, culture, life circumstances. That’s why self-compassion is understanding and accepting rather than punitive and rebuking.

At the same time, compassion is intrinsically concerned with the alleviation of suffering — our own and that of others. If we make mistakes or harm other people and deny responsibility for our actions, we will inevitably be causing further

suffering and won't **learn or grow from our experiences**. We will keep ourselves stuck in the same unproductive cycle of behavior that will plague us over and over again. This is another reason why self-compassion spurs us to take responsibility and correct our mistakes — **because we care and want to thrive**.

Research supports the claim that self-compassion leads to taking more, not less responsibility for our actions. A recent study by Julian Breines and Serena Chen from UC Berkeley [1] had 100 undergraduate students think about a recent moral transgression that they regretted and felt guilty about. One group of participants were then told to write something "kind and understanding" about what happened, another were told to "think about your positive qualities," and another group were told simply to write about their favorite hobbies. The group given instructions to be self-compassionate were significantly more motivated to repair any harm caused by the transgression and committed to not repeat the mistake again than the other two groups.

Another study by Mark Leary and colleagues [3] found that when participants were instructed to be self-compassionate when thinking about a past mistake, humiliation or failure, they were more likely to accept personal responsibility for what happened rather than blaming things on outside people or events. Other studies have found that self-compassionate people are more likely to feel guilt (a sense of remorse and the desire to make amends) rather than shame (a negative evaluation of one's worth as a person) about past offenses [4], and are also more likely to apologize for their mistakes [2].

So being more self-compassionate will not make it more likely that your dog will eat your homework. Self-compassion allows us to turn toward and face the difficult feelings that arise when considering our own mistakes and misdeeds, meaning that we can see ourselves more clearly and do what's needed to make things better.

**References:**

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