



From TDSB Psychological Services to Your Family



SELF-COMPASSION IN DIFFICULT TIMES FOR GREATER PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

by Dr. Andrea Adams, Ph.D., C.Psych., Clinical and School Psychologist

We all know that life is filled with ups and downs. COVID-19 has really made us more aware of our own feelings and the feelings of others during this very difficult time: sadness, loneliness, irritability, frustration, anger. **So much of the way we respond to life's challenges is determined by how we respond to ourselves.** When life is challenging and we are under intense pressure, we might make things more difficult if we are unkind or even cruel to ourselves over what is happening. We may interpret the difficult situation to mean that we are bad people, that we are useless, or that we are not as good as others.

Instead of criticizing ourselves harshly, a healthier response is to treat ourselves with compassion and understanding. Self-compassion research has shown that **people who are kind to, and sympathetic with, themselves when life gets difficult enjoy greater physical and mental health** – they have less anxiety, less depression, and they have a better understanding of who they really are.

Even if we aren't usually compassionate and understanding with ourselves, we can learn to do this by practicing what psychologist Dr. Kristin Neff calls "self-compassion." Dr. Neff explains that self-compassion has three main components: 1) mindfulness; 2) a feeling of common humanity; and 3) self-kindness.

- 1 Mindfulness**, according to Dr. Neff, "involves noticing what is going on for you emotionally, physically, and mentally, in the present moment, without judging your experience as either good or bad" – it just is – and Dr. Neff suggests saying to yourself what you are feeling; for example, "*I am scared*," or "*I am stressed*," or "*I am angry*."
- 2 A feeling of common humanity** involves your feeling connected to all other human beings by the recognition that every person on the Earth has difficult and trying experiences no matter who they are, and that you are not abnormal, inadequate, or less-than anyone else. You can practice this feeling of common humanity by saying to yourself, for example, "*It is not abnormal to feel this way*," or "*Suffering is a part of life*," or "*I am not alone*."
- 3 Self-Kindness** involves giving yourself the same kindness, encouragement, and understanding that you would provide for a good friend who is going through a similar situation. Dr. Neff suggests saying to yourself, for example, "*I'm here for you*," or "*I care about you*." In her Self-Compassion Break exercise (see link on page 3), Dr. Neff guides us to practice placing our hands over our heart, feeling the warmth of our hands, and kindly saying to ourselves, for example, "*May I be kind to myself*," "*May I forgive myself*," "*May I be patient with myself*," "*May I accept myself as I am*," or "*May I learn to accept myself as I am*."

You can try to do this self-compassion practice every day, either alone, with friends, or with family. Watch the change in yourself as you grow more accepting and compassionate with yourself. By doing this, you increase your mental health (lowering depression, anxiety, and stress), and put more compassion and kindness into all your relationships and out into the world. Imagine...

HOW DO WE BUILD OUR RESILIENCE SO WE CAN KEEP GOING?

by Dr. Lauren Dade, Ph.D., C.Psych.



This has been a long journey and although there is a “light at the end of the tunnel”, it will still be awhile before we can greet our friends and family with a long-awaited hug. Many parents, guardians, and children are feeling fatigue and frustration due to an extended period of stress and worry. **So what can we do to help ourselves, and also help our kids?**

HERE ARE SOME OF THE STEPS WE CAN TAKE TO RETAIN AND BUILD OUR RESILIENCE:



Acceptance: We can become sad and frustrated by thinking about how much we want things to be different. Acceptance often isn't as easy as saying “just accept it.” It may mean taking a few quiet minutes to think about your emotions (e.g., sadness, anger), and fully accept them, realizing that we can't change anything that happened before, or things that are out of our control (like COVID-19 constraints). Recognizing and accepting our emotions can give us the energy to make a plan to help ourselves and move forward.

Talking About Feelings: Our children may be struggling with their feelings as well. Once we recognize and accept our own feelings, we can better help our children understand theirs. To do this, it's important to show them how we recognize and cope with feelings, and how they can too. For example, you might say: “*I see that your hands are very tight, and your face looks upset when you hear that you can't see your friends. I know it is frustrating. I get frustrated too.*” It can be comforting to our children to let them know that it's okay to feel their feelings, and that we understand and accept them. (This is also called “validating” their feelings.)



Coping - Trying The Little Things: When we feel like we are running on empty, it can be helpful to do little things that will boost our resilience. We can help our children understand that there are many ways to cope and some can be done in just a few minutes. You might say, “*When I feel stressed/afraid, I like to.....*”. Sharing family stories about past difficult times, and how the family made it through, has been shown to build resilience in our children. Energizing and/or mindfulness activities such as: taking three slow, deep breaths, reading (e.g., reading parts of a novel aloud each day), making up a funny story, drawing or colouring together can help us slow down and reconnect. Taking a short walk and listening to the sounds you hear, or having a family dance party! These are all things that can lift our thoughts and give us energy to face the next day.

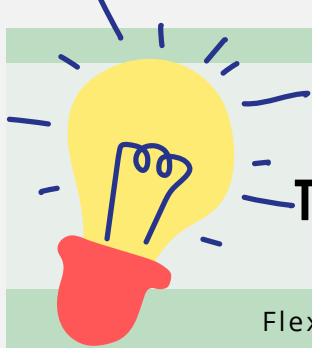
REFLECTING, RECOGNIZING, AND SHOWING OUR CHILDREN HOW WE UNDERSTAND AND MANAGE OUR EMOTIONS CAN HELP TO BUILD RESILIENCE IN THESE ONGOING, STRESSFUL TIMES.

CONNECT WITH US!



TDSB #ShareTheGood
With School Mental Health Ontario

On social media, please tag **#sharethegood** and **@TDSB MHWB, @SMHO SMSO,** and **@TDSB Psych** to celebrate any amazing things that school staff & educators are doing to support students!



DID YOU KNOW?

THE SUPER POWER OF FLEXIBLE THINKING

by Karen Li, M.Psy.



Flexibility is not just about how far you can reach to touch your toes!

FLEXIBILITY is being able to adapt to situations in order to reach meaningful outcomes. It helps us cope with short- and long-term challenges (like a difficult math lesson or the COVID-19 pandemic). Flexible thinking is *NOT* about avoidance. Avoiding difficult situations and emotions by using distraction, lack of engagement, or unhealthy coping tools (e.g., substance use) is usually not helpful. Rigid (less flexible) thinking can be related to greater anxiety, depression, or distress.

Because of this, we know that flexibility is an important skill for kids (and adults!) to learn! It helps us become more efficient learners, and flexible thinking also helps us manage the negative impacts of stress – the more flexible we are, the greater our well-being!

THE RESTRICTIONS OF THE PANDEMIC MEANS MANY PEOPLE ARE NOT ABLE TO USE THEIR USUAL COPING SKILLS. FLEXIBLE THINKING HELPS US TO BE AWARE OF WHEN CHANGE IS NEEDED. IT ALLOWS US TO MORE EASILY ADAPT TO NEW AND EFFECTIVE WAYS OF COPING OR FINDING SOLUTIONS TO A CHALLENGE.

How can we become flexible thinkers? Well, one strategy for flexible thinking is called “reframing”. Research has found that reframing helps us to notice the good or helpful parts of a situation. The more we practice flexible thinking (through reframing and other strategies), the stronger our flexible thinking becomes (kind of like when we practice touching our toes). Let's give it a try!

2 WAYS TO REFRAME YOUR THINKING

Four-Finger Affirmation

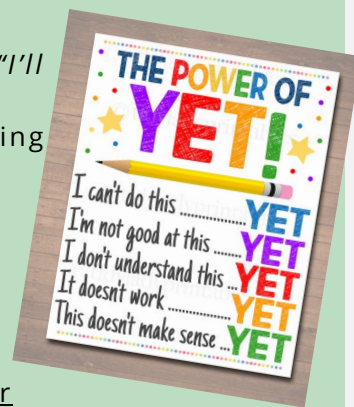
- Think of a 4-word affirmation
Examples: “I can do this”, “Try, try again always”, “I am loved today”, “I’ll get through this”, “I am being brave”, “Today will be awesome”
- Repeat your affirmation daily & anytime you need a reminder, tapping each finger (for each word) with your thumb



The Power of Yet

- Listen to your self-talk. Reframe negative thoughts and replace with a more positive, growth mindset: “I can’t do that...yet.” “I don’t understand...yet.”
- To learn more about the power of yet, watch these videos with your child:

Kindergartener Primary-school age Junior-school age High-schooler



RESOURCES

[School Mental Health Ontario - Flexible Thinking Activities for Well-Being](#)

[Understood.org - A Guide to Flexible Thinking for Learning](#)

[Dr. Kristin Neff's 5-minute Guided Self-Compassion Break](#)

[School Mental Health Ontario: Parents' Role](#)

[TDSB Mental Health & Well-Being Resources](#)

JANUARY 28TH IS BELL LET'S TALK DAY!



TDSB will be joining Bell Let's Talk Day to help create positive change for mental health. Resources and activities for a full week of activities will be shared with education staff and families to help guide conversations about mental health and support well-being.