

# Self-compassion is the superpower year students need for exams and life beyond school

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This week, year 12 students in New South Wales will begin their [final exams](#), with students in other states soon to follow.

This can be one of the most stressful times in a students' life. It can also be very stressful for parents trying to support their children.

But there is a superpower in the arsenal of every year 12 student that can be harnessed to manage this stress. This superpower fuels resilience, not only for exams, but for any difficult situation they may be faced with across their lifespan. It's called self-compassion.

I am a [clinical psychologist](#) who specializes in self-compassion. This is how you can use it, both for yourself and for your kids.

## **What is self-compassion?**

The most enduring relationship we have is the the one we have with ourselves.

This relationship shapes how we think, feel and behave to such an extent that often we are not even aware of it. We may think being hard or critical on ourselves pushes us to achieve results. But research shows this can [lead to self-doubt](#), avoidance of hard tasks, higher risk of psychological illness and poor resilience.

In contrast, self-compassion encourages us to feel comfortable in our own skin. It allows us to generate our own feelings of warmth, reassurance, soothing and liking who we are.

## **What does it look like?**

Difficult moments, like an unexpected exam question, are a ripe breeding ground for self-criticism. You may be familiar with thoughts like, "I'm not good enough, I can't do this, I should have worked harder, I'm going to fail, I am a failure." These self-critical thoughts are almost

addictive—when they pop up it is easy to fixate on them and spiral into panic or avoidance.

In contrast, picture a friend sitting the same exam and getting the same unexpected question. This is a good friend who you really care about. If you could say something to them in that moment, it's probably easy to think of supportive words. Such as, "I know this is hard, but you can do this. Your best is good enough. This one exam will not define your life, even if you get this wrong. I still think you're a wonderful person."

Self-compassionate responses are more likely to make us feel confident, safer and therefore resilient. If we're feeling this way, it will likely be easier to at least attempt the question rather than give up. It is easy to draw on compassionate wisdom for our friends. But why don't we say these things to ourselves?

## **Our tricky brains**

We don't because we have a "[tricky brain](#)".

We like to think of ourselves as sensible and rational, but the brain is actually a faulty piece of machinery. The brain is [hardwired](#), through evolution, to focus on threat.

Noticing threat, and triggering the [flight or fight response](#), is what kept our ancestors alive when they were faced with an aggressive cave man or attack from a saber tooth tiger.

Today, threats tend to be less extreme: like not getting the score we want in a test or not having the career pathway we might like. But our mind and body still react in the same way as if we are facing a saber tooth tiger, flooding our body with adrenaline and the stress hormone cortisol.

## The (many) advantages of self-compassion

Treating ourselves with the same kindness and support as we would a good friend comes with a plethora of mental health benefits.

It is associated with [greater psychological well-being](#) and [a lower risk](#) of developing symptoms of poor mental health.

It leads to [better stress-management](#) and [boosts motivation](#) to study for exams, often contributing to better grades. Self-compassion gives us the bravery to try things we may fail at, because we can take bigger chances if we know we won't beat ourselves up if we fall short. And sometimes, as with more study, these chances and extra effort pay off.

Self-compassion can also weaken the [link](#) between perfectionism and depression. Perfectionism involves [high standards](#) and high levels of self-criticism and which can lead to depressive symptoms, especially when we fall short of our goals. But self-compassion may enable perfectionists to have high standards and be motivated to do well, without experiencing the mental health cost.

For example, in the lead up to an exam, having high standards and wanting to achieve can motivate us to study. But during and after the exam, this perfectionism can turn into self-criticism which places us at risk of feeling low and unmotivated.

If we are compassionate with ourselves, we can normalize how tough exams are, and show unconditional positive regard for ourselves no matter the outcome. These compassionate ways of thinking can help protect us from depression symptoms.

## How can we learn and teach self-compassion?

Some of us tend to be more self-compassionate than others. But if you're not naturally a very self-compassionate person, there is good news. Research [suggests](#) you can learn to do it.

Here are some ways to approach it, both for yourselves and your kids:

- **Check yourself:** before talking with your child about self-compassion, consider how you treat yourself when under stress. Do you notice when your self-critic is triggered? It is hard to be genuine when encouraging someone else to be self-compassionate if you are not.
- **Model self-compassion:** when you make an error, try replacing "I'm so stupid I let this happen" with "I'm upset about this and that's okay—anyone would feel this way in this situation". Talk to yourself in a soft, calm tone. Whether you say it aloud or even just think it, your behavior in that moment will change, and your kids will see this
- **Talk about it:** start a conversation with your child about their relationship with themselves. You could start with: "what do you tend to say to yourself or feel about yourself during exams?" or "what effect does this have on you?"
- **Help them spot self-criticism:** encourage your child to notice when [self-criticism](#) pops up. Give the self-criticism a name such as "Voldemort" or the "angry voice". Say, "When you notice Voldemort is hanging around, gently ask yourself, what would you say to a good friend or a ten-year-old version of yourself in this situation?" This simple question is a powerful way to tap into the compassionate wisdom we all carry
- **Give yourself a hug:** to help calm yourself, give yourself a hug. Either wrap your arms around yourself or hold your hand on your heart or chest and notice the warmth. Research [tells us](#) we get a flood of oxytocin—the body's "love drug"—and relax when we are hugged by someone we trust. Our brain and body has an

almost identical reaction when we hug ourselves. Use as a this short-cut to trigger some feelings of self-compassion.

## **And don't forget this**

Self-compassion is not something you master once, and then move on from. It is a lifelong journey of practicing and learning. Sometimes, especially when we are busy or stressed, it will drop off and we may need reminding of it's superpower.

As a self-compassion researcher, I talk, write, think, debate and practice [self-compassion](#) daily. Yet I still find myself listening to Voldemort at times. This is part of living with a "tricky brain". But there is a more self-compassionate option. And if we take it, the science says we will be more resilient and more likely to accomplish our goals.

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