

Q&A: The impact of compassion on mental health and wellness

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Love isn't easy. Sometimes it's hard.

Taylor Crouch, a licensed clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine, is an expert on how physical pain affects [emotional pain](#). Oftentimes when these issues manifest, Crouch's work shows it can

lead to someone feeling full of criticism toward themselves, disconnected or lonely in their relationships. Crouch focuses on boosting patients' connections to facilitate healing from feelings of detachment and isolation. That includes having more positive connections to themselves.

"Sometimes patients can be concerned that self-compassion is going to make them lazy or self-indulgent, but self-compassion is very different from being self-indulgent. It's really having an attitude of wanting to be as healthy as you can be and live the best life you can by making changes from a place of self-care and self-love," Crouch said.

Crouch spoke with VCU Health News about how compassion, [mental health](#) and wellness can all connect to strengthen our self-image and relationships with others—and what we can do to love ourselves and others more.

What does it mean to have a self-love practice? And what does this look like in someone's daily life?

There can be a more formal [practice](#) of self-love and then there are more informal day-to-day habits that allow us to love ourselves. A more formal practice of self-compassion might be taking some time out of the day to practice types of meditation focused on cultivating loving-kindness, also called metta meditation, as well as other exercises to build daily mindfulness practices. We can practice paying attention to the inner critic in our thoughts and replacing that harsh inner voice with kinder, more compassionate words.

On a day-to-day basis, we can engage in self-care activities rather than just focusing on taking care of other people, our jobs and responsibilities. We can take some time out of our day to do small things

just because we like to do them, whether that's going for a walk, listening to our favorite music or taking a longer bath than is necessary.

Self-love can also be self-advocacy such as speaking up for ourselves, advocating for our needs and wants in personal and professional relationships, which can be difficult and vulnerable.

How does having a loving and/or positive relationship with yourself help your mental health and well-being?

There is a large body of psychological research that shows self-compassion and self-love do have a strong impact on our mental health and our [emotional state](#), both in terms of decreasing anxiety, depression, anger and loneliness and also increasing support and encouragement for ourselves.

Our positive state can increase feelings of happiness, gratitude and connectedness to other people. That self-compassion allows us to calm down our [nervous system](#) and turn down the self-critical voices, which allows us to engage more with our world and with other people. Self-compassion helps us feel more connected to other people because the more self-compassionate we are, the more we're able to be compassionate toward others and connect with others. So self-compassion can also increase our motivation and energy to do things that are important to us.

Whether platonic or romantic, how can a self-love practice also build stronger or more loving relationships?

When we can be compassionate toward ourselves, it opens the door for us to be accepting and loving toward other people. When we're stuck in a

negative state in our mind—even if it is just toward ourselves and not toward others—the emotional impacts can close us off from connecting to other people.

One of the main components of [self-compassion](#) is keeping in mind the common humanity and awareness that your experiences are connected to other people's experiences. Everyone suffers, which allows us to be more empathetic and compassionate with ourselves as well as other people. This is good for friendships and relationships.

Humans are wired for connection with other people whether through words, spending time together or physical touch. We need to be connected to others and that degree of connection directly impacts our mental health.

There's an epidemic of loneliness in our society right now. Even though we have other ways of connecting now through technology and social media, more people report feeling lonely than ever before. And that is related to things like depression, anxiety, physical health problems, and our emotional well-being.

How can people build more loving and stronger relationships while also maintaining a practice of self-love?

When we are working on our [relationship](#) with ourselves, by being kinder and more compassionate with ourselves, what is likely happening is that you're also building feelings of love and compassion toward other people and vice versa.

Now, most of us are better at being kind and loving toward other people than we are to ourselves.

If you're struggling with how you're supposed to be kind toward yourself, you may ask: "What does that even look like? What does that sound like?" Often people have a hard time coming up with an answer to that.

But if you are someone who is caring and loving toward other people, you can ask yourself: "How would I talk to my best friend right now? What would I tell my partner if they were struggling with this? What kind of tone of voice would I use if I was speaking to someone else who was suffering? How would I show up for someone else?"

Flipping your inner dialogue to explore how to help another person can be used as a tool to find ways to better support yourself.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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