



# BE KIND TO OTHERS. BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU? YES, YOU.



## PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF

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*"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."*

So goes the famous quote from Plato. Or was it Philo of Alexandria? Or Ian MacLaren, the Scottish theologian? So often, we fixate on the details of life that it becomes too easy to lose sight of the valuable lessons it has to offer.

In the Bible, we find Jesus advising people of the "Golden Rule," that we should treat others as we would have them treat us. He also encourages us to avoid judging, lest we be judged ourselves.

Rooted in the three teachings mentioned above, we get a sense of urgency to look beyond ourselves, to pay attention to the plights of others, and to afford people our understanding and acceptance in the place of intolerance and rejection.

We become obsessed with how we should interact with others that we miss out on an essential part of the lesson: *that we are called to take care of ourselves as well as those around us.*

Within spiritual practice in particular, there is a misconception long held by some that we are less important and less deserving than others when it comes to understanding and forgiveness. But in truth, we are as deserving of our own forgiveness as others are.

It's sad that we judge ourselves most harshly, that we hold ourselves to ridiculously high standards, and feel ourselves unworthy of kindness and forgiveness for sharing the same quality of being human with billions of other people.

Little wonder, then, that mental health issues, such as chronic anxiety and depression, along with feelings of loneliness and isolation are rife throughout much of the world. We don't see it as the norm, let alone practise the gift of kindness towards ourselves.

### FINDING FORGIVENESS AND COMPASSION WITHIN YOU

Why is it we know, for the most part, that everyone deserves some breathing space to be human, and yet when it comes to our own lives, we are relentless in our expectations?

In Buddhism, the Tibetans have a saying, "May all beings be happy

and free from suffering." Here, we again see ourselves included with the word *all*. While it's important that we should work as best as we can to address those flaws we are able to overcome, the work can only begin by truly accepting ourselves for who we are and however we are: *the more we resist and reject ourselves, the harder it becomes to grow into the best version of who we can become.*

Recent advances in psychological sciences highlight the importance of self-forgiveness and the need to be kind to ourselves. Indeed, new research in this area draws its focus away from seeing the self as being problematic, flawed, or worse, needing therapy. The science of positive psychology, in particular, emphasises the development of a mindset built on an individual's unique strengths and virtues.

One such virtue is self-compassion, which ties in neatly with the idea of self-forgiveness. Being self-compassionate means treating yourself with the same level of kindness as you would a good friend, or a loved one.

Being self-compassionate and forgiving is, as you might know, easier said than done. Both feel unnatural and strange. Try it now. Tell yourself you are going to be kind to yourself in the following week and treat yourself to a weekend getaway once you're done with your hectic week. Do you feel like you deserve it? Or do thoughts arise along the lines of, "I haven't done nearly enough to deserve a break"?

Why is practising self-forgiveness and self-compassion so difficult?

### 2. NEGATIVE SELF-ASSESSMENTS AS A MOTIVATING FACTOR

Another reason why self-forgiveness does not come easily is because we think that negative, pessimistic assessments of ourselves are motivating. Intriguingly, such perceptions stem from a place of fear—a fear that being forgiving and compassionate towards ourselves is going to make us complacent.

Our inner critic may be a remnant of our punitive upbringing, or a vestige of our educational experiences. *Spare the rod and spoil the child.* Such sayings influence the parenting and educational experiences we have growing up.

How critical we are towards ourselves is, in part, shaped by what we were told, how we were judged, and how we were assessed in our early life. Is it any wonder, then, that we may be inadvertently raising a generation who may be academically brilliant, but whose self-worth is at the mercy of others' evaluations and judgments? Perhaps we simply aren't told that it's perfectly fine and healthy to be kind to ourselves.

This desire for superiority may even extend to our personal lives. We must do better than our neighbours. Our children ought to do better than the neighbour's children. We must do more for our family than our relatives. Our children deserve the very best.

Unknowningly, such a need for superiority means that we leave very little time and energy for us to consider our own needs and wants. And what happens when we mess up, or make mistakes along the way to perfection? Should we simply forgive ourselves for not fulfilling our fullest potential and for making one too many mistakes?

*"No! I haven't the time to forgive*

*myself when there's just so much I must do; when there's so much I should be achieving."*

We may very well be our worst enemies, especially when we feel we have not accomplished as much as we should have. We live our day-to-day lives under the tyranny of "shoulds" and "coulds" or "could haves" that paralyse our ability to be self-forgiving and self-compassionate.

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Self-forgiveness and self-compassion acknowledges that we share a common humanity; that suffering is a pervasive part of the human experience and that we should be kind to all beings. All beings, including ourselves.

Self-forgiveness, then, is not a luxury gift to be given but rather a necessity for our mental and emotional well-being. Self-forgiveness is a part of, and a pathway towards cultivating a more self-compassionate existence. None of us are or can be

perfect, despite our best attempts at image projection and selective social media posts.

As with life itself, we are all complex works in progress which, with the right tools and effort, can be transformed into works of art, much like sculptures that have been chiselled with care and their rough edges patiently smoothed.

Kindness towards the self is absolutely the starting point if we hope to grow in any meaningful way and be of benefit to others. There's a reason why

all the great sages have urged us to "know thyself." They understood that, if we hope to look beyond the faults of others and help them shine, the only way to achieve that desire begins with looking beyond our own faults and learning to shine ourselves.

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*Eugene tries to practise by looking at drafts of his articles on self-forgiveness and saying to himself, "It's fine. Sandy will think it's fine." This occurred after the 5,327th draft. He tweets at @eugene\_tee*

■ Sandy is a keen practitioner of self-forgiveness, which usually occurs on a Monday after a weekend of digging into desserts. He recognises patience as a virtue, and each cheesecake his teacher. To connect with Sandy, follow him @RealSClarke on Twitter.

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## HOW TO ACHIEVE SELF-FORGIVENESS

Self-forgiveness involves forgiving ourselves when things don't go well, responding to situations where we may have messed up with a little more kindness and understanding towards ourselves.

Self-forgiveness is related to self-compassion, where we try to be kinder to ourselves with the recognition that suffering, difficulty and troubles are all part of a shared human experience.

Forgiving ourselves, and responding in a compassionate manner towards ourselves is difficult because we often have a strong need for superiority and feelings of competence. Our need for superiority may be shaped by competitive environments, which favours the need for control, certainty and assurance.

Directing forgiveness, compassion and kindness toward ourselves also doesn't come easily because of our upbringing and early educational experiences. These early experiences play an influential part in creating the notion that kindness breeds complacency. Reflecting on one's early experiences may help in understanding and correcting these inaccurate views of self-compassion.

### ▶ TRY THIS!

One suggestion for practising self-forgiveness and self-compassion is to think about how you would console a friend or loved one who is in a similar situation. The next time you make a mistake or experience some difficulty, verbalise how you would console a friend or loved one who is facing the same situation. Then, direct it inwards towards yourself. Talking to yourself like someone you would care for is a simple way to practise self-compassion.

You can also try writing a letter to yourself. Try envisioning that you are writing a letter to a friend who is experiencing some difficulty in his/her life. Write about how you would console this friend, and how you would reassure this person. Direct, instead, the letter to yourself by replacing the name of your friend with your own. Studies have shown that writing such self-compassionate letters can help enhance feelings of well-being and lower depression.