

Why it's cool to be kind to yourself

If you're constantly blaming yourself for slimming slips and feeling like you're not measuring up, you could be your own worst weight-loss saboteur. Here's how showing yourself a little kindness could make a big difference to your success

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Why is it that we find it easy to be kind and supportive to our friends, but difficult to be as understanding to ourselves? There's a growing body of research to show that treating ourselves kindly and with true self-compassion could be the key to successful weight loss. So instead of kicking ourselves when we have a bad day or week, we should take a very different approach and develop an inner voice that tells us it's *not our fault*. Just as we would with a friend who was struggling, we should show ourselves care and understanding. After all, we're not supposed to be perfect – making mistakes is part of being human.

Studies even show that practising self-compassion actually changes areas of the brain physiologically, and it's been linked to lower levels of depression and stress, too. So, next time you have a slimming setback, don't beat yourself up. Cut yourself some slack and practise these strategies to help pick yourself up, dust your (perfectly wonderful!) self off and carry on with your slimming journey.

✓ Think (and talk) positive

'Self-criticism is one of the most disruptive inner processes and a big barrier to happiness and well-being,' says psychologist Professor Paul Gilbert OBE from the University of Derby, author of *The Compassionate Mind* (Constable, £9.99). Studies show that even making jokey comments about our own size has a negative impact on our body image: when we're putting ourselves down, it's easy to assume other people have the same thoughts, even if they're outwardly kind and accepting. 'You see both the outside world and your inner world as critical and condemning, and as a result, you have nowhere safe, calming or kind to go,' says Paul. Is it any wonder that we then turn to food for comfort?

TREAT YOURSELF RIGHT: 'Visualise your inner critic as a person,' suggests Paul. 'Imagine saying to it: "I'm sorry you're angry, upset and feeling vulnerable, and that you want to lash out like this. However, I'm going to be more in charge now." What you're doing is standing up to the critical side of yourself, recognising that it's linked to threats, disappointment

and voices from your past, and arriving at a point in your life when your compassionate self starts to take control,' says Paul.

✓ Know that it's OK to slip up

Contrary to what you might think, being perfect isn't the secret to successful weight loss! Even the most focused of slimmers has a bad day now and again – what's important is how we cope with them. 'When we lapse, we generally feel awful about ourselves,' says Slimming World's research specialist Dr James Stubbs. 'Feeling self-critical puts us on the defensive and we seek comfort where we can – often with more food. By being compassionate with ourselves, we can recover more readily, learn to cope with the things that trip us up, and try again.'

TREAT YOURSELF RIGHT: A big part of being kind to yourself is knowing →





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how to ask for help when you need it, so use your Slimming World group as a support. ‘Feeling you’re understood by others who have been through similar experiences is very important, and realising that we all have lapses helps us recognise that these are part of being human,’ says James. ‘It’s also a way of emotionally lightening your load, by sharing the burden of all the negative feelings you’ve been struggling with.’

✓ Close your thinking-feeling gap

There’s a world of difference between agreeing that it’s important to be kind to yourself and actually feeling that way deep down. ‘On an intellectual level, we may know that we’re loved and accepted by others, but on an emotional level we may not feel it,’ says consultant clinical psychologist Dr Mary Welford, author of *The Compassionate Mind Approach to Building Your Self Confidence* (Robinson, £15). Even if you’ve stopped actually putting yourself down, you may still be living with an underlying sense of guilt – and that has the power to sabotage your weight-loss efforts even if you’re not fully aware of it. In fact, the bigger your thinking-feeling gap, the harder it is to make long-term changes.

TREAT YOURSELF RIGHT: Give yourself a hug! According to psychologist Dr Kristin Neff from the University of Texas, kindness has the same effect on your brain whether it comes from yourself or another person. In both cases it reacts by releasing the calming chemical oxytocin, and reducing levels of the fight-or-flight hormone, cortisol. Just imagining yourself on the receiving end

of kindness can be enough, says Kristin. So when you feel low, wrap your arms around yourself and give yourself a hug. ‘By acting kindly, feelings of true warmth and caring will follow,’ she says.

✓ Show shame the door

Human beings are social animals and, whether we admit it or not, we care about what others think. If we’re overweight, it’s all too easy to imagine – however wrongly – that people think we’re lazy or have no self-control. We may even believe we’re right to criticise ourselves and that we *should* be ashamed for letting ourselves ‘get into this state’ – whereas in reality, shame tops the list of toxic weight-loss saboteurs. ‘Feeling awful about ourselves doesn’t make us try harder,’ says Dr James Stubbs. ‘It has the opposite effect and makes us give up or rebel. If you learn to manage negative emotions like shame and self-criticism, you’re in a better place to make healthy choices – and the best antidote to both shame and self-criticism is self-compassion.’

TREAT YOURSELF RIGHT: When shame is nagging at you, ‘heart-focusing’ can be a powerful self-soothing exercise. Sitting quietly, take your right hand and place it an inch or so over your heart, so it’s close but not touching. Breathing slowly and deeply, first imagine compassion flowing to someone who is important to you, who is upset and needs your love and support. Then imagine this compassion flowing into your own heart area and showing the same love and care to yourself, soothing and healing you.

✓ Bring out the ‘best you’

Having a solid rock of self-confidence to fall back on is like savings in the bank – it’s what gives you resilience when the going gets tough, and helps motivate you to make the long-term changes you need to live your best life. A growing number of experts think the key to building such self-confidence is self-compassion. ‘Self-compassion doesn’t

depend on being successful,’ says Mary Welford. ‘It helps us to treat ourselves in a way that brings out our best, and gives us a greater chance of building the self-confidence we need in times of difficulty.’

TREAT YOURSELF RIGHT: Find a place where you won’t be disturbed for 5-10 minutes, close your eyes and imagine your ideal ‘compassion coach’ – someone who has your best interests at heart and focuses purely on your well-being. Imagine them being sympathetic to your difficulties and always knowing what you need, sometimes offering gentle encouragement and motivating you. What are they saying to you? How do they look at you? How do they show you that they care for you? Spend a few minutes visualising your coach on a regular basis. Then, when you’re feeling bad about yourself or you’re facing a difficult situation, bring them to mind. What would they say to you? How would they want you to feel and react?

If you’re struggling, taking a quiet moment to put things into perspective and let your ‘perfectionist’ persona go a little can give things a positive new spin. As Slimming World’s founder and chair Margaret Miles-Bramwell says, ‘Never forget that you are worth far more than your weight. You are courageous and complex. You are kind and caring. You are warm and giving. You are perfectly imperfect.’ ●

