

Four Ways Self-Compassion Can Help You Fight for Social Justice

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How can we effectively bring about a more just world? Although it may not be obvious at first glance, self-compassion plays a key role in the quest to end sexism, racism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. By aiming compassion inward as well as outward, we can better confront the pain of injustice without being overwhelmed, and find the strength and energy to fight for what's right. Self-compassion helps us cope by accepting our difficult feelings, and also by changing the circumstances causing them. ... Tender self-compassion uses warmth and nurturing to soothe and reassure ourselves when we are distressed. Fierce self-compassion uses the power of action to protect ourselves, fulfill our needs, or motivate change. Metaphorically speaking, tender self-compassion is like a parent comforting his child, while fierce self-compassion is like Momma Bear defending her cub.

Self-compassion has three core components—kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness—and the fierce and tender aspect of each has an important role to play in the social justice movement. Kindness provides warmth, love, and understanding when we're hurting from the pain of injustice but also spurs us to be brave and courageous as we try to correct it. Common humanity helps us feel connected to others as we acknowledge that oppression harms everyone, and also empowers us as we bond with others in the struggle for equality. Mindfulness allows us to turn toward and be present with the pain of discrimination and also provides the clarity needed to call it out.

As we advocate for change, it's essential that fierceness and tenderness be balanced. If we're too tender without taking enough fierce action, we may become complacent. But if our fierceness is not tempered with tenderness, we may become hostile and aggressive, undermining compassion. As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love." When our quest for justice stems from self-compassion, we may be firm and unyielding, but there is love rather than hate in our hearts.

Although the research on self-compassion and social justice is still in its nascent stages, it appears that there are at least four ways that self-compassion may be beneficial for social justice action.

1. It helps women counter stereotypes and reclaim their power

In Western culture, gender-role stereotypes portray women as "communal" (sensitive, warm, and gentle), and men as "agentic" (strong, independent, and action-oriented). This means that women are raised to be tender but not fierce, undermining their power. Practicing self-compassion can help women counter limiting stereotypes and reclaim their fierce inner warrior.

For instance, Ashley Allen and her colleagues conducted a study with over 200 women and found that those with higher levels of self-compassion also scored higher in feelings of empowerment. They felt stronger and more competent, asserted themselves more, felt more comfortable expressing anger, and were more committed to social activism. In another study, they found that women in a domestic violence shelter who learned about self-compassion in a support group felt significantly more empowered and able to keep themselves safe. A qualitative study of self-compassion training for women with complex trauma found that it helped them become more assertive and less submissive. "It's made me feel like I've put on like a compassionate armour where y'know I'm able to handle each day better," one participant said. "I'm able to just be compassionate with all aspects of my life . . . it makes me feel stronger and feel more empowered."

2. It provides resilience for victims of injustice

Self-compassion can help people to cope with the negative impact of discrimination. A recent study of over 200 Asian American college students found that those with higher levels of self-compassion were less likely to become depressed when encountering anti-Asian racism. The strength and support as well as warmth and self-acceptance provided by this kind mindset helps to counter the negative messages conveyed by others.

Self-compassion has also been found to be a powerful resource for LGBTQ+ youth, who are often stigmatized for being different. Abra Vigna and her colleagues examined compassion in LGBTQ+ teens' experience of bullying at a Midwestern high school. They found that teens who were more self-compassionate were better able to cope with being bullied, threatened, or harassed, and were less likely to become anxious or depressed as a result. In a second study, these researchers found that self-compassion reduced anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ youth of color who were bullied due to their race as well as sexual orientation, underscoring the strength of self-compassion as a source of emotional resilience in the face of unjust treatment.

3. It helps prevent burnout while working for justice

Self-compassion can help us sustain the quest for social justice by countering the burnout and exhaustion that arise when fighting for issues like gender equality, racial justice, or human rights. Social activists are particularly prone to burnout given the intense and daunting task they face in trying to change entrenched power structures. Opening yourself to the pain of injustice is distressing enough, but it is made worse by the hateful backlash from those in power who fight your efforts relentlessly. This creates perfect conditions for burnout, causing many people to give up their activism altogether.

Unfortunately, activism can also be accompanied by a belief that care should only go one way: toward others. Kathleen Rodgers conducted in-depth interviews with 50 Amnesty International workers and found that a culture of selflessness and self-sacrifice pervaded the organization in a way that directly increased burnout. As one worker commented, "There's a built-in potential for guilt, of not doing enough about the people who are the victims of violation, that 'deserve' or 'need,' or 'must have' the attention, and every bit of attention, and every bit of energy that we can possibly bring to it."

This view fails to recognize how self-compassion is actually the energy source powering our ability to help others. By caring for our own needs, we're less likely to become exhausted or to experience the secondary traumatic stress that can arise when fighting injustice. My research suggests that self-compassion training reduces burnout and stress while also increasing compassion satisfaction—the positive feelings experienced from one's work, such as feeling energized, happy, and grateful for being able to make a difference in the world.

4. It helps us deal more effectively with guilt or shame

Self-compassion may also be beneficial for those who unknowingly perpetrate injustice. White people often resist acknowledging their own negative stereotypes about people of color due to the shame it causes. No one wants to believe they are racist. The shame that wells up at the mere insinuation of racism interferes with our ability to acknowledge the unconscious biases that undergird systemic racism. Being kind and understanding toward ourselves facilitates the ability to see that even when we don't consciously hold racist views, racism unconsciously influences our interactions with others simply by virtue of growing up in a racist society. If we can acknowledge these biases without harsh self-judgment, we have a chance to correct them. A dissertation study at the University of Kentucky examined this issue among 240 white adults. Individuals with more self-compassion experienced less shame about being white, and also had less fear and distrust of people of color.

If we're going to bring justice to an inequitable society, we'll need to make sure that our compassion is directed toward ourselves as much as toward others. We can rely on fierce self-compassion to provide focus and energy to our efforts and tender self-compassion to nourish us on our journey.