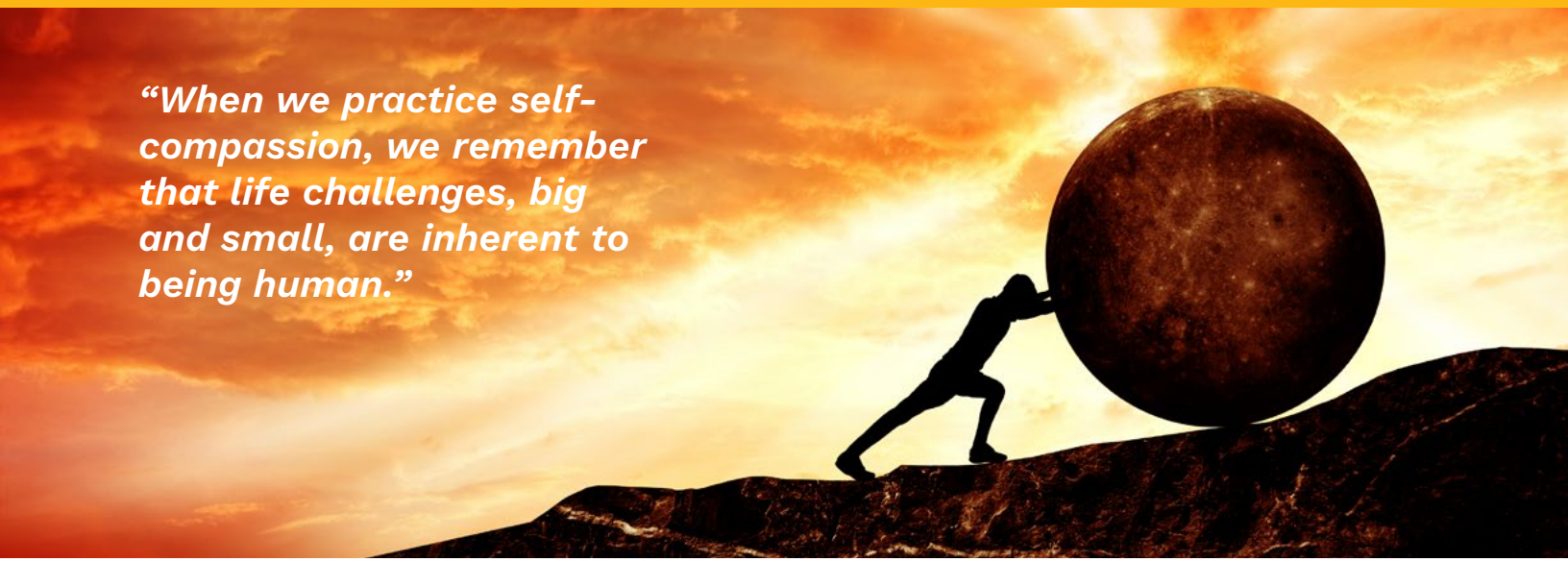
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Finding Choice and Freedom in Self-Compassion

by Bridget Donegan

A specific sense of relief comes when a friend responds to our troubles with ease: “Well, of course!” “Of course you’re having a hard time sleeping with all that pressure on you!” “Of course you’ve lost your confidence after what they said to you!” “Of course you’re overwhelmed!”

When a friend offers total, untroubled acceptance of our distress, a layer of it melts away. Our distress becomes less distressing. We are less convinced that our troubles mean we are inherently inadequate, fundamentally flawed, somehow “wrong,” or “not enough.” Yes, the uncomfortable truth is still true and still uncomfortable. But a compassionate, connected perspective gives us a toehold from which to choose our next step. We can move forward responsibly.

Directed inward, that same compassionate, connected response is a powerful way to support ourselves. In a flood of studies over the last twenty years, researchers are confirming what ancient wisdom traditions have long taught: self-compassion is a strengthening, healing, motivating practice; it does not weaken our resolve or dim our ambitions.[1] Instead, practicing self-compassion is a way to interrupt our stress and anxiety cycles and provide more clarity for how we want to engage with our lives.

The Elements of Self-Compassion

As legal practitioners who face many demands and stressors in our professional and personal lives, leading with self-compassion can feel dangerous—like we are letting ourselves off the hook, being undisciplined and weak, or lowering our standards. That worry stems from the fact that self-compassion, as researcher Dr. Kristin Neff explains, calls us to "stop judging and evaluating ourselves altogether."[2] If the project is figuring out what is wrong with me and fixing myself, then judging and evaluating myself feels necessary. But with self-compassion, rather than trying to "fix" ourselves so we no longer suffer (an impossible task), we kindly accept the basic fact of our current reality as part of our human experience. We stop judging and evaluating who we are in service of evaluating how we want to be and what we want to do.

With self-compassion, therefore, our standards and values remain in place. A self-compassionate lawyer is an excellent lawyer: research consistently shows that practicing self-compassion leads to more resilience, less self-defeating perfectionism, and reduced stress and anxiety.[3] Perhaps unexpectedly, a kinder acceptance of ourselves sharpens rather than dulls our edge as attorneys.

In her research, Dr. Neff has identified three elements of self-compassion: taking a *balanced awareness* of our difficulties, rather than overly identifying with or pushing down our discomfort; offering *self-kindness*, rather than criticism or judgment; and recognizing our c*ommon humanity*, understanding our predicament as part of being human, rather than feeling isolated or alienated by our pain. Any time we notice some distress, practicing any one of these can be a helpful relief and reality check.

1. Balanced Awareness

Compassion, by definition, is responsive. There is no compassion without suffering, so self-compassion is available only when we recognize our own suffering. If self-compassion feels especially tricky, it may be helpful to practice recognizing suffering in one of its milder forms, like boredom or impatience. Or perhaps practice seeing suffering in an area that carries less self-blame, such as insomnia, indignation, or disgust. The first step is only to see that our dissatisfaction or discomfort is a form of suffering. Balanced awareness speaks to the quality of how we see the suffering. With self-compassion, we neither dive headlong into the suffering nor shove it down and away. We offer simple (though not necessarily easy) awareness of our suffering without avoiding, exaggerating, or identifying with it.

In compassion, like empathy, we suffer alongside another. Where compassion differs from empathy is that compassion includes a motivation to relieve the suffering.[4] This motivation is present in self-compassion as well—we are not indulging self-pity or wallowing helplessly in our pain. And often, in our desire to relieve suffering (our own and others), we jump straight to intellectual problem solving. As lawyers, this is a comfortable mode. The element of balanced awareness, however, reminds us that the healing comfort of compassion is not in problem solving. Instead, balanced awareness means that we first allow ourselves to be caring witnesses to suffering, without trying to erase it or wrench it away.

When we do not bring balanced awareness to our pain, we tend to either identify with it or avoid it. Identifying with it can feel like being swept up in our distressful thoughts and feelings. Instead of just, *I am dreading going to work,* we may say, *I'm an anxious person* or *I can't hack this.* When a client meeting goes terribly, we start to think, *I'm terrible.* Rather than seeing our distress in a broader context, it takes on outsized authority and we begin to believe it indicates a truth about who we are.

Avoiding our pain can look like pushing through our days without acknowledging any distress. Rather than letting it be natural and okay to feel uncomfortable or angry, we power through, trying to perform how we believe we should. This can look like emphasizing our intellectual or analytical understanding of our situation, not tolerating emotions that seem irrational, or relying heavily on willpower in the face of physical signs that we need more rest or care.

Moving toward balanced awareness means catching ourselves when we start to identify with pain or run away from it, and instead experimenting with checking in with how we feel. With balanced awareness, we suffer without adding extra. According to Dr. Neff, that perspective "is the pillar on which self-compassion rests."[5] When you notice an unpleasant feeling without seizing onto it or shoving it down—just seeing it, even for a moment—you are practicing this core component of self-compassion.

2. Self-Kindness

Treating ourselves kindly is probably what first comes to mind when we think of self-compassion. If self-criticism and shaming exist at one end of a continuum, kindness is on the other. Self-kindness can be a simple acknowledgement with a kind tone: *This is hard right now. I want this so badly. I do not know what to do. This hurts.* And also, *What do I need? What can I do for myself right now?*

The kindness of self-compassion is not self-indulgence; it does not mean "anything goes." It means moving away from self-condemnation. Moving toward kindness may simply mean quieting a self-critical narrative; we may not always be able to access an affirming statement, but we can stop beating ourselves up.

Many of us have been conditioned to feel a certain amount of self-protection in being harsh with ourselves, like there is some morality in self-punishment, or we are proving to ourselves that we know how one *ought* to behave. Experimenting with self-kindness, however, reveals that accepting the simple reality of our immediate condition is different from encouraging it in the future. Like the power in naming something, when we kindly acknowledge our distress with a willingness to help, we gain some leverage for dealing with it.

3. Common Humanity

Finally, when we practice self-compassion, we shift away from our tendency to see our pains and hassles as unique flaws that set us apart from others. That isolating tendency might sound something like, *Everyone else is handling this fine. Nobody else is struggling like I am. I am too broken to belong here. I should be fine.* The feeling of being abnormal leads to disconnection and loneliness, exacerbating our suffering. When we practice self-compassion, we remember that life challenges, big and small, are inherent to being human. The way stress shows up in our lives, whether physiologically, emotionally, or cognitively, is inherent to being a human being.[6]

My experience is that most of us intellectually grasp that nobody is perfect. Everybody fails. But that abstract understanding often feels irrelevant when we are immersed in our own struggles, which are decidedly not "everybody's"; my struggles are mine and nobody else's. When I fail, it feels highly specific and textured; it hurts in a particularly pointed way, seems to hold a truth personal to me, and is not tidy or static. How could something so specific to me be universal?

I understand this component of self-compassion on two levels. Although there is truth in the deep specificity of our individual experiences, the more we share with and listen to other people, the more we directly experience our essential similarities: we do relate to each other's pain. That is a lesson many of us learn repeatedly, every time we dare to confide in a trusted, caring person. We are simply more similar, and more deeply so, than we tend to realize.

At the same time, the specific details, histories, and contours of our personal experiences are unique. We cannot know another person's inner life. But that, precisely, is the universality of our predicament. We all share the experience of being not exactly the same. The specificities of my struggle, the edges of my experience that do not quite line up with yours, do not mean that I am alone; they are the essence of our common humanity.

Choosing a Path Forward

I spent many months as a practicing lawyer living with a hum of vigilance. It felt absolutely essential to maintain a constant background level of tension so I did not overlook something



important, or so I could catch and fix anything that was missed. To do otherwise felt dangerous.

Through my experience in law practice and at the OAAP, I have seen that such periods of vigilance are not uncommon for lawyers. A small experiment in self-compassion might be worth a try for those of us who feel that anxious hum. We can notice the hum and the tension. And then notice whatever comes next. Notice and let go of the idea that you should feel differently, and remember that your stress is a natural human response. Perhaps then consider what you need, including talking to someone else or asking for help.

One of the greatest benefits of practicing self-compassion is more ready access to mental freedom and flexibility. Constricted thought and rigidity, on the other hand, are risks of holding tight to our vigilance. When we stop straining against our own experiences, we tend to find that the pressure releases. Dropping that struggle, and seeing our natural responses as the ongoing unfolding of life, opens up a significant amount of space for choice.

How do you want to approach your day?

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OTHER WORKS BY BRIDGET DONEGAN AT OAAP.ORG

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- The Tyranny of Shoulds (Fall 2025)

ENDNOTES

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