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How Would You Treat a Friend? Part 2:

Activities to Boost Self-Compassion within School Health Curricula

VAL ALTIERI JR., SIERRA CORDOVA, JOHN MCCARTHY,
ROBERT DIEHL, AND MARIAH ROONEY

The overall psychological well-being of adolescents is increasingly concerning, with nearly one-third of high school students across the United States experiencing poor mental health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). Recent CDC data highlight a troubling rise in adolescents' persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness over the past decade, demonstrated by a 21% increase among female adolescent and an average increase of approximately 11% across adolescents of all races and ethnicities. This alarming trend underscores the urgent need for enhanced socioemotional health support in schools and the implementation

of health-promoting strategies to help adolescents manage their stressors.

Although educators often cannot control the stressors experienced by their adolescent students, they can teach them gentle and understanding ways to respond to their challenges or suffering. As such, Part 1 of this article series (Altieri et al., 2026) explored the concept of *self-compassion*—a skill that can help individuals enhance resilience in the face of the social, emotional, and developmental challenges they encounter. Practicing self-compassion involves treating oneself with the same kindness, care, and understanding as

one would a close friend. It is composed of three core elements, including practicing *mindfulness*, defined as holding and accepting one's negative emotions in a non-judgmental manner; *self-kindness*, which is being understanding and self-affectionate toward oneself, rather than harshly critical; and acknowledging a *common humanity*, described as recognizing that enduring challenges are a shared phenomenon in the human condition, allowing oneself to feel more interconnected with others and less isolated (Neff, 2003b). Part 1 addressed common misconceptions regarding the use of self-compassion, emphasizing that self-compassion is neither indulgent nor a sign of weakness, but rather a powerful tool for personal growth. It presented research underscoring the importance of self-compassion in helping adolescents navigate intense emotional challenges, self-criticism, and social pressures. Additionally, it described how teaching self-compassion in classrooms must be culturally responsive, considering that most research on self-compassion has been conducted within Western contexts, which limits its general applicability across diverse cultures. Finally, Part 1 of this series highlighted the need to adapt lessons to honor the unique cultural backgrounds and challenges experienced by students, particularly those from marginalized groups, to effectively foster resilience, emotional well-being, and inclusivity.

In this article, Part 2, the authors focus on supporting students' self-compassion by drawing from the self-compassion curriculum developed by Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer that teaches individuals how to strengthen the skill of self-compassion through mindfulness-based practices, such as noticing inner dialogue and engaging in reflective exercises. Through self-compassion, individuals can learn to advocate for their own mental health by integrating mindfulness practices that not only deepen and enhance the experience of self-compassion, but also support steps such as recognizing needs, setting boundaries, and protecting their well-being (Neff, 2011; Neff & Germer, 2018). Although this article does not cover Neff and Germer's full self-compassion curriculum, it adapts the self-compassion exercises and concepts into a lesson plan curated specifically for health educators to integrate into their classrooms. By focusing on these select, adapted self-compassion activities, health educators can incorporate elements of self-compassion in ways that align with the 2024 SHAPE America National Health Education Standards (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2024). This particular adaptation allows for flexibility while still promoting the essential skills of mindfulness, self-kindness, and a recognition of common humanity. Educators can refer to the *Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* (Neff & Germer, 2018) or the official self-compassion website (<https://self-compassion.org/>) for additional guidance on using appropriate language, avoiding judgment, and validating student experiences to effectively implement self-compassion practices.

The self-compassion lesson plan includes instant exercises, discussion prompts, readings, scenario-based practices, videos, future planning exercises, and journaling reflections. Teaching

considerations are included to support inclusivity. Additionally, this article addresses important considerations for teachers, such as cultural responsiveness, follow-up strategies, and self-compassion practices that can personally benefit educators. It is important to note that although self-compassion is a valuable skill for promoting well-being, it is not a replacement for professional mental-health care when needed. However, by incorporating these practices into their curriculum, health educators can empower students to build emotional resilience, which enhances their overall well-being.

Before delivering a self-compassion lesson in the classroom, it is essential to recognize the potential emotional and cultural factors that can influence students' engagement with the material. Teaching self-compassion can touch on sensitive areas for some students, particularly those who have faced trauma or have diverse cultural perspectives on self-care. By considering trauma-informed and culturally responsive strategies beforehand, educators can better facilitate a safe, inclusive, and motivating learning experience.

Considerations for Teaching Self-Compassion

Like learning any new skill, it can be beneficial for students to start applying self-compassion to less complicated, "everyday" struggles, such as feelings of impatience or frustration. Students should begin practicing with a situational or temporary struggle, rather than a deeply ingrained, long-term issue. For example, they could choose a problem in the mild to moderate range, as Neff and Germer suggest in their workbook: "Choose a problem in the mild to moderate range, not a big problem, as we want to build the resource of self-compassion gradually" (Neff & Germer, 2018, p. 35). This issue could be a situation in their life that is causing them stress, but is more manageable—such as a small area of impatience or frustration that might be common to other students; for example, feeling frustrated when their group members are late turning in their part of a group project, or feeling left out when friends make plans without them. As they become more comfortable with self-compassion, they can eventually progress to applying it to more personal or challenging struggles.

It is also important to recognize that each student's perceptions and struggles are unique and shaped by factors such as their personality and prior experiences. While more complex issues—like body-image dissatisfaction, abuse, self-harm, neglect, alienation, bullying, suicidal thoughts, loss, grief, or substance abuse—may arise and be of interest for students to apply self-compassion, it is not always possible to predict what challenges may be triggering for a student, even with mild or moderate struggles. For this reason, connecting with school counselors, social workers, or psychologists before teaching self-compassion exercises is advised. Sharing lesson plans, clarifying referral pathways, and confirming that an appropriate support network is in place can help students to receive the care they need if sensitive issues surface. Importantly, this does not mean teachers should avoid self-compassion exercises; rather, with proper collaboration, they can confidently introduce practices that build resilience and self-kindness while knowing that additional support is available if needed. It is also important to note that teachers must always remain transparent about their role as mandated reporters and clearly communicate this responsibility to students. This approach ensures students understand confidentiality limits and trust that their safety is prioritized, especially when sensitive topics arise.

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Implementing trauma-informed practices is important for creating safe and inclusive environments when teaching self-compassion, a topic that naturally invites personal reflection and emotional exploration. Trauma-informed care is an approach to teaching—and caregiving across several contexts—that acknowledges the widespread impact of trauma (i.e., the emotional and psychological response to deeply distressing events that overwhelm an individual’s ability to cope) and focuses on creating environments where individuals feel safe, supported, and empowered (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], [n.d.](#)). This approach to care includes recognizing that students may have experienced trauma or emotional challenges and offering them choices in how the engage with the activities. Moreover, fostering trust, openness, and mutual respect within the classroom can further promote an inclusive atmosphere where students feel empowered to learn at their own pace. Part 3 of this series (Cordova et al., [2026](#)) will elaborate on how trauma-informed practices can be integrated into the classroom, and it explores specific approaches to promoting emotional safety, ensuring transparency and trustworthiness, fostering peer support, and encouraging student empowerment through choice, all while helping students build resilience and navigate personal challenges with confidence.

Sometimes the notion of being more compassionate and kind to oneself is foreign to a student’s way of thinking about themselves. This issue can stem from a combination of individual differences, familial expectations and modeling, cultural differences, and societal forces such as life portrayed in social media. As students begin to engage with self-compassion, they can gradually learn to access it as a resource to cope with any of life’s struggles. However, introducing self-compassion to students requires teachers’ sensitivity to the diverse cultural and personal contexts that shape students’ perceptions of self-care.

Having explored the importance and complexities of integrating self-compassion in culturally diverse classrooms in Part 1 (Altieri et al., [2026](#)), it is clear that a one-size-fits-all approach may not fully address the varied needs of students. By getting to know students’ cultural backgrounds and values, educators can better tailor self-compassion lessons to reflect how self-compassion is understood in their lives. Encouraging collaborative learning, where students share their experiences with self-compassion, can promote mutual understanding and connection. Additionally, incorporating activities that reflect students’ family traditions and community practices, rather than relying solely on Western mindfulness techniques, may make the lessons more relevant and impactful. Finally, by remaining flexible and continuously adjusting strategies based on student feedback, educators can ensure their approach evolves to meet the unique needs of their students.

To integrate self-compassion in the health classroom from a culturally responsive stance, the authors recommend integrating reflection as a precursor to delivering self-compassion lessons with students. The reflective questions presented in [Table 1](#) are intended to help teachers examine how they approach students’ emotional reactivity, recognizing that their own lived experiences can shape the expectations they hold and the behaviors they encourage in students.

Self-Compassion Lesson Outline

Because self-compassion has been demonstrated to be a learnable “skill” (Germer & Neff, [2019](#)), the lesson plan was designed using a *skills-based approach* (Benes & Alperin, [2022](#)) that supports the gradual development of health-related skills that build on one another to promote mastery and real-life application. In this context, students are introduced to self-compassion as the core quality

Table 1.
Preparing to Teach Self-Compassion Reflection

How do you think the core elements of self-compassion (practicing nonjudgmental mindfulness, being kind to oneself, and recognizing challenges as a common, human experience) are relevant to your students' lives, both in and outside of school? Would your students agree? How can you tailor examples of practicing self-compassion in a way that centers on students' own stories and cultural values?

Does your view of self-compassion privilege your values over your students' in any way? In doing so, are your students practicing self-compassion in a way that might not benefit them (or only benefit those with dominant sociocultural identities)? For example, do you believe that being kind to yourself is more motivating than being hard on yourself, whereas students and their caregivers might not?

When your beliefs on self-compassion and its benefits differ from your students' or their caregivers', how can you view these cultural differences as strengths to build on and work with rather than to shut down or dismiss?

Information from Greater Good Science Center University of California Berkeley (n.d.).

(treating oneself with kindness, recognizing common humanity, and holding personal struggles in a balanced awareness) and are taught how to practice self-compassion. To support this process, the lesson is structured into the five sequential steps of the skills-based approach that scaffold students' understanding and application of self-compassion. The steps are:

1. **Introduce** the skill in a way that highlights its importance and relevance to the real-world.
2. **Present** the skill into more broken-down, detailed components using examples of how the skill can be applied.
3. **Model** how the skill can be applied effectively in-action, sometimes in a step-by-step manner.
4. Provide opportunities to **practice** the skill during structured activities, give feedback, and refine the skill through repetition.
5. **Assess** skill development, including use of student-self-assessment and support students' **transfer** of the learned skill to contexts beyond the classroom and in the future.

An outline of the self-compassion lesson plan is shown in [Figure 1](#). Step 1 *introduces* the concept of self-compassion by using the "How Would You Treat a Friend" activity (Neff & Germer, 2018), encouraging students to reflect on the difference between how they treat others versus how they treat themselves. In Step 2, the three critical

National Health Education Standards - Performance Indicators (SHAPE America, 2024)				
Grades 6 through 8 7.8.2 Analyze practices and behaviors that support personal and community health and well-being. 7.8.3 Demonstrate practices and behaviors that support personal and community health and well-being.				
Grades 9 through 12 7.12.1 Analyze supports and barriers to engaging in health-related practices and behaviors. 7.12.2 Evaluate practices, behaviors, and other factors supporting individual and collective health and well-being. 7.12.3 Adapt practices and behaviors to support individual and collective health and well-being. 7.12.4 Demonstrate a variety of practices and behaviors supporting individual and collective health and well-being.				
Skill Development Model (Benes & Alperin, 2022)				
Step 1: Skill Introduction	Step 2: Skill Presentation	Step 3: Skill Modeling	Step 4: Skill Practice	Step 5: Skill Assessment and Transfer
Definition, relevance, outcomes	Present skill cues/critical elements	Show skill applied effectively and highlight critical elements	Students practice skill in authentic situations with feedback	Summative assessment; reinforce real-life application, relevance, and transfer outside of the classroom
Instant Activity 1 How Would You Treat a Friend? Exercise Instant Activity 2 Hearing Your Own Voice Activity 3 Defining Self-compassion and Self- Reflection	Activity 4 Student Reading: Critical Elements of Self-compassion	Activity 5 Modeling Self-compassion	Activity 6 Applying 3 Critical Elements of Self-compassion in Scenario-Based Practice Activity 7 Video/Steps - Being Kinder to Yourself: Take a Self-Compassion Break	Activity 8 Creating a Self-compassion Plan Activity 9 Self-compassion Reflection / Journal

Figure 1.
Self-compassion skills-based lesson outline

elements of self-compassion—self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness—are *presented*, providing students with concrete tools for practicing self-compassion. Step 3 *models* these elements in a relevant scenario, allowing students to observe their application. Step 4 offers opportunities for students to *practice* the skill through guided scenarios and meditation and receive feedback. Finally, Step 5 focuses on *transferring* these skills outside of the classroom, helping students develop a personal plan for applying self-compassion in their daily lives, and prompting them to reflect on their ability to implement plans for self-compassion. Thus, students *assess* what strategies helped, consider what barriers exist, and think about what adjustments can be made to overcome those barriers.

Activity Guidelines

The following guidelines structure the activities included in the self-compassion lesson. Each activity begins with an explanation of its purpose, outlining the intended outcomes and reasons why the activity is valuable for skill development. Objectives follow, specifying the key skills or insights that students are expected to gain through participation in the activity. The approximate time for each activity is also provided to help with planning and pacing. Instructions for each activity include step-by-step directions for delivery. After instructions, examples of teaching considerations are included, offering suggestions for

modifications, accommodations, and trauma-informed considerations to ensure that the activities are accessible and inclusive for all learners. These alternatives consider students’ diverse needs and preferences, helping all students fully engage with the lesson (further guidance is available at <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>). Finally, during class discussion facilitation, prompts and questions are provided to guide reflective conversations. These discussions encourage students to share their insights and deepen their understanding of the concepts presented in the activities.

Before the main skill introduction, teachers can begin with instant Activities 1 and 2. These are quick-to-start, focused tasks designed to immediately engage students and prime them for the upcoming lessons. Instant activities often serve as warm-ups, helping students activate prior knowledge and connect with relevant concepts. In the context of self-compassion, these activities allow students to explore key ideas in a low-pressure setting, preparing them for deeper engagement with the core skill-development activities that follow.

Step 1: Introduction to Self-Compassion

Instant Activity 1: How Would You Treat a Friend?

Purpose: (Instant) Activity 1 (see [Figure 2](#)) brings awareness to the concept of self-compassion by walking students through a guided

1. How Would You Treat a Friend?	2. How Do You Treat Yourself?
First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about themselves or is really struggling in some way. Describe a situation they might be going through.	Now, think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. Describe a situation you are struggling with.
How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Write down what you typically do and say. Note the tone in which you typically talk to your friend.	How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Please write down what you typically do and say. Note the tone in which you talk to yourself.
What words would you use to describe your approach (your words and your actions)? What is the purpose of your words and actions?	What words would you use to describe your approach to yourself (your words and your actions)? What is the purpose of your words and actions.
3. Did You Notice a Difference?	
Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why you think there is a difference. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?	
Please write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.	

Figure 2.
How would you treat a friend?

comparison of how they typically respond to a close friend's hardship or suffering versus how they respond to their own personal adversity.

Objectives:

- Students will compare how they respond to a friend versus how they respond to themselves when they are struggling.
- Students will examine possible obstacles to offering themselves self-compassion.

Approximate time: 10 minutes.

Instructions: Using the activity in [Figure 2](#), students begin by recalling how they respond when a friend is struggling: What do they do? What do they say? What is their tone? Students will identify words that best describe their approach and intent. Students will then complete the same recollection for how they respond to themselves under similar circumstances. Then, students will examine the differences (and/or similarities) and consider possible reasons why they may not always extend the same compassion to themselves as they readily show to a friend in need. Finally, students will reflect on how things might change if they treated themselves with the same compassion when they are suffering. The educator should explain to the students that there are no “right” wrong” answers.

Class discussion facilitation:

- The teacher asks students to submit the words that described their approach and intent behind their responses about how they would treat a friend and how they typically treat themselves (i.e., a column labeled, “Self” and an adjacent column labeled, “Friend”).
- Display them side by side. Examples of students’ answers under the “Self” column might include, “Mean, to motivate myself,” while an example under the “Friend” column might include, “Caring, to be supportive.”
- Depending on the comfort level of students, teachers can ask students to share with the class, or submit anonymously on a piece of paper or by use of an Internet polling app.
- The teacher can ask, “What do you notice here?”. Teachers or students should provide commentary on students’ shared experiences that emerge.

Teaching considerations: Alternatively, students can choose different mediums for response, such as creating a mind map, drawing, or using symbols to represent how they treat themselves versus others. This approach can be helpful for a student who finds verbal or written reflection triggering or too direct.

Instant Activity 2: Hearing Your Own Voice

Purpose: The activity in [Figure 3](#) invites students to engage in the experience of actually *hearing* their internal self-talk or internal monologues and noticing the ways in which it lands in their ears and impacts their body. The activity is intended to assist students in externalizing a mostly internal process so that they can experience the many narratives we carry about ourselves in a more visceral and embodied way. Our minds tell us all kinds of stories about who we are, who we are not, whether or not we are good enough, or smart enough, for example. However, taking the step to literally

give these stories and beliefs a voice—our own—can be transformative, awakening, and powerful in shifting our mindset.

Objective: Students will explore how they feel when they speak to themselves by analyzing tone and language.

Approximate time: 10 minutes.

Instructions: Preface the activity by explaining that the only thing needed for the exercise are a student’s hands, voice, listening ears, and curious mind. Students should be organized with as much physical distance from each other as possible, facing outward or against a wall to give themselves permission to focus only on their own experience hearing the sound and tone of their voice. If space is limited, students can curl inward and lower their head on the desk or while sitting on the floor. The script in [Figure 3](#) will guide the exercise and is intended to be read aloud as students follow.

Following the exercise, students should write reflective notes using the following questions:

- What did you notice about how your body responds when you hear your name spoken in a critical tone, followed by negative self-beliefs?
- What do you notice about how your body responds when your name is spoken with warmth and care, followed by positive self-beliefs?

Class discussion facilitation: The teacher asks the following:

- Does anyone feel comfortable sharing?
- What do you notice about how you speak to yourself?

Depending on the comfort level of students, teachers can ask them to share with the class or submit anonymously on a piece of paper or by use of an Internet polling app.

Teaching considerations:

- Alternatives for accessibility can include students visualizing the words in their head through sign language, using materials other than their hands that can create a private space around their mouth or face without the need for hand cupping (e.g., whisper or speak into a pillow, book bag, or other adaptive material), or using a text to speech app).
- Students can be given the option not to close their eyes. Instead, students can focus their attention on a fixed point in the room or on a grounding object. This approach allows them to participate in a way that feels less vulnerable and still promotes self-awareness.
- Students can be provided a pre-recording of the script and listen through headphones (this allows students to control how and when they engage because they can pause, stop or replay, which can help reduce anxiety and empower them to navigate the activity at their own pace).

Activity 3: Defining Self-Compassion and Self-Reflection

Purpose: Because some students may struggle with the notion of offering themselves compassion, it can be useful to discuss some

1. Pause for a moment, perhaps close your eyes if you'd like, and think about what your voice sounds like when you are frustrated with yourself or criticizing yourself. Cup your hands and bring them in front of your mouth, close to your face. With this tone of voice in mind, say your name to yourself. Repeat this several times.

Notice and note what happens in your body and what else arises as you hear your name with this frustrated or critical tone.

2. Shake out your hands. Pause for another moment, closing your eyes if that feels right, and think about how your name sounds when a friend or loved one is speaking to you with care. When you're ready, cup your hands, bring them in front off your mouth again and repeat your name to yourself several times with this warm and loving tone. This is the tone of "how you speak to a friend".

Notice and note how this warm and loving tone lands on your ears, how your body responds, and anything else that arises.

3. Shake out your hands. Now, think about some negative belief you hold about yourself or a phrase that you often say to yourself that is negative, such as "I'm never going to be good enough at this," "I'm so stupid," etc. Imagine the tone that you hear when you say this to yourself in your head and, when you're ready, bring your hands back to your face and repeat this phrase or belief to yourself out loud several times.

Notice and note how these negative self-beliefs land in your ears and feel in your body. What else arises?

4. Shake out your hands. Shake out your body. Lastly, think about something positive that you believe about yourself on a good day or something positive that is often reflected back to you from others. Bring your hands back to your face and then repeat this to yourself out loud several times, with the tone of how you would say this same thing to a friend.

Notice and note how these positive self-beliefs land in your ears and feel in your body. What feels different?

Figure 3.
Hearing your own voice (script read aloud by teacher)

of the possible reasons that make it counterintuitive for them to do so. Students may have had early experiences with family, communities, or in other groups they belong to that may not be in step with adopting a self-compassionate stance toward themselves. This experience may include cultural or social conditioning (e.g., familial, sports, church/religion, broader societal views), or may be related to the way the young person internalized messages that led them to take a more harsh approach with themselves than others. Thus, the following discussion questions are aimed at helping

students to engage in processing how they might develop acceptance and kindness toward themselves.

The activity includes three sequential parts in which students work to do the following: (1) define self-compassion; (2) view a video (or read its captions/transcripts) that highlights how constant self-criticism activates the stress response and hinders motivation, while approaching challenges with self-compassion supports motivation, self-responsibility, and improved overall life satisfaction; and (3) collaboratively reflect on Instant Activities 1 and 2.

Objectives of defining self-compassion:

- Students will define self-compassion and explain its significance in personal well-being.
- Students will analyze how self-criticism and self-compassion affect motivation and well-being by identifying the origins of their own self-critical thoughts and comparing them to information presented in a video.
- Students will reflect on and discuss how practicing self-compassion during Activities 1-3 has influenced their approach to challenges and self-perception, identifying any barriers, such as self-criticism, that may have shaped their responses to adversity.

Approximate time: 15 minutes.

Instructions for defining self-compassion: The teacher defines *self-compassion* for students. Benes and Alperin (2019) suggest that “It’s often helpful to use the stem, ‘_____ is the ability to ...’ because a skill is something that you are able to do” (p. 5). As stated earlier, self-compassion is defined as a way of treating oneself with the same acceptance, kindness, and support as one would a close friend (Neff, 2003a, 2003b).

Class discussion facilitation: The teacher asks the following:

- If you tend to be harsh with yourself, why do you think that is? Can you identify where that comes from?
- Is it your voice? Does it sound like someone else in your life?
- Does it come from a message you’ve heard in your family, community, from social media, or society about how you “should” be?
- If not, where else might it be coming from?

Note that a common response for self-criticism is “it motivates me.”

Teaching considerations: The teacher can use analogies that link self-compassion to familiar practices, like caring for a friend or family member, making it easier for students to relate. For example, if a student is used to helping a sibling, the teacher could explain that self-compassion is simply offering the same kindness and patience to themselves. This approach grounds self-compassion in something tangible, particularly for students from backgrounds where caring for others is emphasized more than self-compassion.

Instructions for viewing the video: The teacher plays the video “The Space Between Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion” (2013), which highlights the misconceptions of self-criticism as a means of motivation—a common myth against the use of self-compassion—and its physiological consequences. In the video, Kristen Neff describes the ways in which constant self-criticism activates a stress response that can lead to depression, which actually undermines motivation (9:40–12:18). Neff also explains that human beings are not programmed to thrive against harsh criticism; instead, meeting challenges with compassion not only increases motivation, but is strongly linked to greater self-responsibility, healthier lifestyle choices, social connectedness, and increased life satisfaction. The video is available via the following short link: <https://youtu.be/IvtZBUSplr4>

Teaching considerations: The teacher should provide the link to the video ahead of time with transcripts that allow students to pause or rewind, giving them control over how they engage with the content.

Instructions for collaborative reflection: After completing the exercises, it can be helpful to process with others who shared this experience. Students can reflect in pairs, small groups, or as a class to respond to the questions for class discussion facilitation. Students can use their notes from Activities 1 and 2 to recall what they noticed and felt.

Class discussion facilitation for collaborative reflection: The teacher asks the following:

- Did these activities alter the way you feel about dealing with challenges or about how you respond to yourself during difficulties?
- If you found that the idea of offering yourself compassion and positivity was difficult, why do you think that was?

Teaching considerations: The teacher gives students the option for private reflection.

Step 2: Presentation of Self-Compassion

Activity 4: Student Reading on Critical Elements of Self-Compassion

Purpose: Activity 4 presents students with the three critical elements of self-compassion: mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity (see Figure 4). This activity is designed to help students apply the three critical elements of self-compassion by guiding them through the process of becoming aware of their thoughts and emotions in a balanced, nonjudgemental way. It encourages them to externalize their inner dialogue, recognize that struggles are a shared part of the human experience, and practice self-kindness when faced with challenges. By engaging with specific and/or personalized cues related to the three critical elements, students learn to respond to their struggles with understanding and warmth.

Objectives:

- Students will be able to explain the three critical elements of self-compassion (i.e., mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity).
- Students will apply self-compassion techniques by identifying and analyzing their internal self-talk, recognizing their shared human experiences, and practicing self-kindness through words or supportive self-touch (e.g., resting their foreheads in their hands in a comforting way, putting a hand on their heart, wrapping their arms around their body in way that mirrors a hug) during moments of stress or perceived failure.

Approximate time: 10 minutes.

Instructions: Students should compare the three core elements of self-compassion with their antitheses (i.e., self-judgment, isolation, overidentification). Then, students can explore what

Mindfulness vs. Over-Identification	Mindfulness Cues
Self-compassion involves the willingness to become aware of our thoughts and emotions with a balanced and non-judgemental open mind in which we do not suppress nor exaggerate our thoughts and feelings. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. However, self-compassion requires that we not “over-identify” with thoughts and feelings so that we are caught up and swept away by negative reactivity. This balanced stance stems from relating our personal experiences to those of others who are also suffering and putting our own situation into a larger perspective.	If you say something like: “I feel like I’m totally going to fall apart.” You might acknowledge that: “In this moment, a part of me is struggling.” You might choose to say: • “Whoa, this feels awful.” • “This sucks.” • “This is stress.” • _____
Common Humanity vs. Isolation	Common Humanity Cues
Frustration due to not having things exactly as we want is often accompanied by a strong sense of isolation—as if “I” were the only person suffering or making mistakes. All humans suffer, however. Being “human” means that one is mortal, vulnerable, and imperfect. Therefore, self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience—something that we all go through rather than being something that happens to “me” alone.	If you say something like: “It’s always me that has this issue. Why me?!” You might acknowledge that: “This kind of struggle is a part of life.” You might choose to say: • “Many others struggle this way, too.” • “I’m not alone with this feeling.” • “This is a part of being a teen.” • _____
Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment	Self-Kindness Cues
Self-compassion entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than harming ourselves with self-criticism. It involves recognizing that being imperfect and experiencing difficulties is inevitable. Be gentle when confronted with painful experiences, rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals. When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced.	If you say something like: “I can’t do anything right.” You might ask: “What do I need to hear (words) right now?” • “I accept myself as I am.” • “I am doing the best I can, and I am doing well.” • _____ You might offer yourself kind, soothing, supportive touch and ask: “What do I need to feel (sense of touch) right now?” • Put a hand or fist on your heart. • Wrap your arms around your body in a way that mirrors a hug—hug yourself as you would a friend having a rough day. • Rest your forehead in your hand in a comforting way. • _____

Figure 4.
Critical elements and cues for applying self-compassion

practicing those elements might sound, look, or feel like for them as the “cues” for each element (see Figure 4).

Teaching considerations:

- The teacher can give students the option to write or speak positive affirmations instead of requiring them to also practice supportive self-touch (which may be uncomfortable for some students due to past trauma).
- Students are encouraged to reframe the cues in language that resonates with their cultural or personal background. For example, instead of saying, “I am enough,” students could choose culturally resonant phrases like, “I am capable” or “I am valued” that feel more aligned with their experiences and cultural norms.

Step 3: Modeling Self-Compassion

Activity 5: Modeling Self-Compassion

Purpose: Students will access the example provided (see Table 2) that describes a scenario featuring the struggle of a high school student encountering an academic challenge. The example describes the way in which the three elements of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—can be used to cope with a poor midterm exam and support the desired outcome for the next time.

Objective: Students will be able to analyze situations that teenagers may experience and apply the three components of self-compassion to each situation

Approximate time: 5 minutes.

Instructions: The teacher models by exemplifying what saying kind words would sound like (e.g., “It’s okay—one test doesn’t define me,” or “This grade doesn’t erase all the effort I’ve put in”) and demonstrates supportive self-touch (e.g., wrapping their arms around their body for a self-hug).

Table 2.
Modeling Self-Compassion

A student doesn’t do as well as they’d hoped on a midterm exam. Instead of beating themselves up for not being smart or studious enough, they take a moment to breathe and remind themselves that everyone has disappointing moments from time to time (*common humanity*). They acknowledge their negative feelings, but try not to let them consume them (*mindfulness*). They think about how they would talk to their friends if this happened to them—how comforting and supportive they would be—and aim to treat themselves the same way (*self-kindness*) by offering themselves kind words and a self-hug. This approach helps them feel more able to approach the teacher and ask about study tips for next time.

Adapted from Greater Good Science Center University of California Berkeley (n.d.).

Step 4: Practicing Self-Compassion

Activity 6: Critical Elements of Self-Compassion in Scenario-Based Practice

Purpose: For some students, offering themselves compassion may be a new concept, so it may take a while for them to see the value or feel comfortable practicing it. Additionally, in the context of a classroom setting, students may privately be interested in the idea, but are afraid to say or do something (e.g., offer themselves supportive self-touch) that could be seen or mocked by their peers or judgmental others. As such, practicing on hypothetical scenarios can be more accessible and comforting to students before they practice on their own personal scenarios.

Objective: Students will be able to apply self-compassion to challenging situations or struggles other students may be experiencing.

Approximate time: 15 minutes.

Instructions: Students will work in small groups to apply the three critical elements of self-compassion to at least three of the five challenging, real-life scenarios teenagers might face (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Applying the Three Critical Elements of Self-Compassion in Sample Scenarios

Scenario 1: A student overslept and was running late for school. They were in a hurry so they did not notice they put on a shirt with a big stain on it. The rest of the day they were worried about the stain and that people were staring at it. They couldn’t focus in class because of fear of someone noticing. They were also annoyed that they overslept.

Scenario 2: A student didn’t get into their dream college. They keep focusing on the one school they didn’t get into. They keep thinking they should have done more and don’t even want to go to any of their other options. They told their friend that everyone else got into their top choice.

Scenario 3: A student had an argument with their friend and blamed themselves because they know they overreacted and no one else would have done so. Their friend is very upset with them. The student is worried that they may have ruined their relationship and have been distracted by it all day during school.

Scenario 4: A student athlete had an opportunity to win the game but missed the shot. Their team ended up losing in overtime. They keep thinking about it over and over again because they feel they let their team and school down.

Scenario 5: During a group project, a student shared an idea inspired by their cultural practices, but their classmates dismissed it, saying it was “weird” and not relevant to the assignment. Feeling hurt and rejected, the student starts questioning whether they should have shared at all and worries that they don’t belong in the group. Throughout the day, they replay the moment in their mind, feeling ashamed for being “different” and considering whether to avoid participating in future discussions.

After students read the scenario, they will discuss and decide how each critical element (i.e., mindfulness, common humanity, self-kindness) of self-compassion can be applied.

Note: It is important to consider students' context and relevance for particular student needs when using the scenarios. Scenarios can be modified based on knowledge of what the students are currently experiencing and what is most relevant to them.

Teaching considerations:

- The teacher could allow students to choose one scenario, rather than responding to all five.
- The teacher could allow students to collectively create or agree on a scenario of their own.

Class discussion facilitation: The teacher asks the following: How did you apply the three critical elements to the scenario(s) that you explored?

Activity 7: Being Kinder to Yourself: Take a Self-Compassion Break

Purpose: This activity (see Table 4) demonstrates an example of how students can practice being intentionally kinder to themselves under circumstances of stress and anxiety. It includes mirroring or following a few quick steps that encourage self-kindness, along with aspects of self-forgiveness, and self-acceptance, in a moment of suffering.

Objective: Students will be able to apply self-compassion to challenging situations or struggles that students that may be experiencing

Approximate time: 10 minutes.

Instructions: Teachers can access and play the guided video from the Greater Good Science Center, "Being Kinder to Yourself: Take a Self-Compassion Break" (go to <https://youtu.be/AyQdeYjXUHE>) or lead the practice by simply using the step-based script in Table 4.

Table 4.
Taking a Self-Compassion Break

Step 1	Think of a situation in your life that is difficult and causing you stress. Consider beginning with a lower level 1 or 2 (mild to moderate) struggle to start.
Step 2	Call the situation to mind and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.
Step 3	Say to yourself, "This is a moment of suffering" (acknowledge this as mindfulness).
Step 4	Say to yourself, "Suffering is a part of life" (acknowledge this as common humanity).
Step 5	Put your hands over your heart and feel the warmth of your hands and gentle touch on your chest and say, "May I be kind to myself" (acknowledge this as self-kindness).

Class discussion facilitation: The teacher asks the following: How did it feel to practice the critical elements of self-compassion on a real-life scenario?

Step 5: Transferring and Reflecting on Self-Compassion

Activity 8: Creating a Self-Compassion Plan

Purpose: Students create a plan to implement self-compassion in a stressful situation they are currently experiencing. This approach gives the students an opportunity to transfer what they are learning to help them cope with a current stressor.

Objective: Students will create plan to use the three critical elements of self-compassion (i.e., mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness) when they are experiencing a struggle.

Approximate time: 10 minutes.

Instructions: Students will begin by making a list of challenging experiences or events that may signal the use of self-compassion. Using that list, students will plan how they will practice being more self-compassionate in the subsequent week.

Students should identify an "everyday" challenge (in the mild to moderate range; something that is causing them stress but is manageable), versus something more challenging, "as we want to build the resource of self-compassion gradually" (Neff & Germer, 2018, p. 35). To start, the struggle should be less of a personal attribute or identity, and rather something more situational and temporary.

Students are assigned to put their plan into action over the next two weeks during a challenging situation and record their experience including successes, challenges, and how they felt after each time they practiced their plan. They will use the Activity 9 questions to reflect on their overall experience.

Note: The teacher should be mindful of the possibility of students accessing stressors or traumatic events that can lead to adverse reactions. They may consider alternative and comparable options to completing this activity (e.g., built out scenarios students could choose to work from).

Teaching considerations: Teachers can consider having students submit or share their challenge ahead of filling out the self-compassion plan. This way, teachers can monitor potentially advanced challenges at this point in self-compassion skill development (see Figure 5).

Activity 9: Self-Compassion Plan Reflection

Purpose: Students reflect on their experience applying self-compassion to a real-life challenge.

Objective: Students will analyze and reflect on the implementation of their self-compassion plan.

Approximate time: 10 minutes.

Instructions. Students will reflect on at least one time they tried being self-compassionate. Remind them it is okay if they struggle with the reflection (see Figure 6).

Think of a situation or a problem that causes you a lower level of stress (suffering). Describe it below:		
Self-Compassion Elements	Self-Compassion Cues	Your Self-Compassion Plan
Mindfulness	Say to yourself, "This is a moment of suffering." Or you might choose to say to yourself: "I am physically exhausted." "I'm disappointed that I..." "I feel guilty that I..." "I'm frustrated that..."	Your Words:
Common Humanity	Say to yourself, "Suffering is a part of life; many other students and people struggle in a similar way." Or you might choose to say to yourself: "Other young adults feel this way, too!" "I'm not alone." "All young adults feel like this at some time or another."	Your Words:
Self-Kindness	Say to yourself, "May I be kind to myself." Or you might choose to ask yourself, "What do I need to hear right now?" "I accept myself as I am." "I am doing the best I can, and I am doing well." "Your worth is not dependent on your output." "I deserve rest." "What do I need to feel (sense of touch) right now?" - Put a hand or fist on your heart. - Wrap your arms around your body in a way that mirrors a hug—hug yourself as you would a friend having a rough day. - Rest your forehead in your hand in a comforting way. - Another gesture that feels right for you. Then, give yourself permission to offer and accept kindness from yourself.	Your Words: Your Touch:
List people, groups, or communities of peers who would be supportive of your plan:		

Figure 5.
Creating a self-compassion plan

Reflect on your self-compassion plan:
How often were you able to practice self-compassion (i.e., Mindfulness? Common humanity? Self-kindness?) How did you feel about the stressful situation or problem you identified after implementing your self-compassion plan?
What helped you implement your plan?
What barriers got in the way of implementing your plan? What adjustments can you make so that you might break through those barriers?
What did you learn from practicing your plan?
What's another stressful situation or problem where you might try using self-compassion?

Figure 6.
Self-compassion reflection

Class discussion facilitation: The teacher asks the following (students can reflect in pairs or small groups before responding):

- What did you find helpful for implementing your self-compassion plan? What were some barriers to implementing your self-compassion plan?
- What did you learn from implementing and reflecting on your self-compassion plan?
- How can you help others in your community practice self-compassion?

When wrapping up the lesson, the teacher should remind students that like any skill, self-compassion requires practice. Then, they can offer additional self-compassion resources (see Table 5).

Following Up with Students

Health teachers often encounter students sharing sensitive and personal information, and this experience can become even more pronounced when students engage in self-compassion practices. When students write or share harsh self-criticism, it may raise

Table 5.
Self-Compassion Resources and Additional Exercises

Hobbs, L., & Tamura, N. (2022). *Teaching Self-compassion to Teens*. Guilford Publications.

Bluth, K. (2020) *The Self-Compassionate Teen: Mindfulness and Compassion Skills to Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice*. The Instant Help Solutions Series.

A Moment for Me: A Self-Compassion Break For Teens: <https://ggie.berkeley.edu/practice/a-moment-for-me-a-self-compassion-break-for-teens/>

How to Help Teens Become More Self-Compassionate: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_help_teen_become_more_self_compassionate#:~:text=Research%20has%20shown%20that%20teens,%2C%20and%20low%20self%20esteem

Self-Compassion Practices and Exercises: <https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-practices/>

Center for Mindful Self-Compassion Meditations: <https://chrisgermer.com/meditations/>

Compassionate Mind Resources: <https://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/exercises>



concerns about their mental health or well-being. How can teachers respond in a supportive and helpful way? Additionally, how can teachers care for their own well-being when confronted with distressing comments?

If students become aware of their tendency toward harsh self-criticism and openly share these thoughts with their teacher, it can create an opportunity for an ongoing dialogue, which can help the teacher guide the student toward disarming self-defeating thoughts. Understanding these insights about the student allows teachers, as caring adults, to offer supportive and encouraging words. Being curious and asking students about the challenges they face in applying self-compassion can help teachers build rapport and support trust building. Although there is no formula for following up with students, a key is to convey that students are deserving of a kinder, more caring approach toward themselves.

Whereas teachers want students to be honest in their responses, some issues, such as extreme self-criticism or other indications of distress, can be stressful for teachers to navigate. In cases where students' appraisals of themselves are particularly harsh, it is likely that a follow-up will be helpful in challenging their assumptions. If further concerns arise, teachers should always consult with their school counselors, social workers, or psychologists to ensure that students receive the appropriate support and care.

Benefits of Self-Compassion for Teachers

Supporting students who express harsh self-criticism or a history of trauma can be taxing for teachers, weighing heavily on their mental and emotional well-being. Teachers often form close bonds with their students (Di Lisio et al., 2025) and may feel a strong sense of responsibility for their welfare. While teachers demonstrate a remarkable capacity to care for students and are trained to engage in self-reflection as part of professional growth, research shows that this same reflective practice can also contribute to emotional strain; teachers may experience guilt, frustration, or a sense of inadequacy when, despite their efforts, they perceive they cannot alleviate students' struggles or change difficult circumstances (Howard, 2025). When teachers feel unable to resolve or alleviate the trauma of their students, they sometimes experience what is known as *secondary traumatic stress* (NCTSN, 2011), a type of stress reaction that occurs when a teacher is exposed to the trauma experiences of students. The impacts of secondary traumatic stress can leave teachers not only feeling powerless to help particular students, but also emotionally drained, anxious, or irritable.

Students may regulate their emotions and behaviors in response to guidance or modeling from significant adults Bornstein & Esposito, 2023). Because of this process, a teacher's *emotional contagion*, defined as "catching" the emotional state of those around us (Hatfield et al., 1993), may inadvertently reinforce stressed behaviors

in students or interfere with efforts to support them in regulating their stress responses or emotions. For the personal well-being of both teachers and students, teachers can benefit from coping strategies such as self-compassion that support their own emotional regulation to effectively manage secondary traumatic stress and promote healthy co-regulation in the classroom (Altieri et al., 2021; Cordova et al., 2023a; 2023b).

Instead of criticizing oneself, judging teaching performance, or ruminating over perceived shortcomings, teachers may come to realize that it is okay to not always *get it right*, or that they cannot fully “heal” students or feel responsible for resolving their every problem. By applying mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity to their own thoughts or feelings, teachers can better navigate challenging emotions or situations by treating themselves with the same warmth, understanding, and acceptance they offer their students. Through this approach, teachers not only model healthy coping strategies for students, but also foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment. By embodying and demonstrating these valuable skills, teachers cultivate an empathetic and respectful classroom culture that promotes a shared practice of stress management and resilience among students and teachers alike, and builds a strong sense of community in the face of challenges that reduces the likelihood of bullying and other harmful behaviors.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Learning to practice self-compassion has the potential to be an enduring resource to benefit students throughout their lives. While not a cure for all the challenges youth face, self-compassion can be a positive coping mechanism. At the same time, there will always be some barriers to the implementation of a self-compassionate approach. When students have an insufficient number of caring adult models and do not have close supportive relationships, it can be quite difficult for them to be able to imagine what compassionate behavior “looks like” and “feels like.”

Even the notion of the concept of self-compassion can seem foreign to many. Sharing these practices of self-compassion with other influential people in youths’ lives—such as parents and guardians or extra-curricular youth workers such as youth sport coaches or leaders of music and arts—could be helpful in having caring adult models that youth can access and who can model the mindful practices suggested in self-compassion. If caring adults model the use of self-compassion, then students can see how this sort of practice can be used as a resource to cope with the stressors they experience.

To conclude this article series, Part 3 (Cordova et al., 2026) will discuss the importance of integrating trauma-informed approaches when teaching self-compassion and offers strategies educators can implement.

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