



COOL TO BE KIND

An active and vivid imagination often spurs creative people to achieve great things, but it can also conjure up doom-and-gloom scenarios that isolate and bring on feelings of self-loathing. Perhaps it's time creatives showed themselves more self-compassion

Has it ever occurred to you how closely linked many of life's interesting moments are to those of your imagination? These might be your accomplishments, the way you cook or look, how well you succeed at a particular sport or the types of holidays you take and how you approach them. Without imagining things first, they cannot be brought to life. Creativity does not merely express itself in artistry. It shows itself in how you lead your life and in your inclination to self-style and challenge the expectations of convention.

Someone from a strongly artistic family background told me about her lack of creativity. In the same breath she told me about her years of adventurous foreign travel to remote parts of the world where few tourists ventured. At home she swims in the sea with abandon and is never happier than when life comes to meet her and she can deal with the unexpected.

Interestingly, this same woman experiences severe anxiety and jealousy in social or work settings. She often feels herself at odds with those around her, not quite sure what is expected and struggling to fit in. As much as the trust she has in herself and her imagination are the making of her when she sets off into the great unknown, it's equally true that her anxious imagination breaks her when she starts brooding on 'what if?' scenarios at work

and socially. Did they really chuckle at what she said? What if others simply did better than she did?

As if those narrative distortions aren't painful enough, she then chastises herself for being useless rather than rejoicing at her best efforts, and ends up feeling shamed – a cascade of negative experiences that leave her feeling isolated and alone. Your imagination can help you thrive and grow into your best self, but it can also diminish and isolate you with doom-and-gloom scenarios that are followed by a helping of self-loathing.

The creative brain

Human beings are endowed with imagination, but the right-hand side of the brain is more strongly developed in creative people. This is the part of the brain that thinks in metaphor and pattern. It is visual, pre-verbal and non-linear and tends to jump in an associative, rather than logical way, from one idea to the next. Thinking about instability at work one moment might have you begging on the streets in the next. The right-hand side of the brain is also more closely connected with the limbic system, the part that generates feelings and looks after us in fight-or flight scenarios.

This explains why some creative people feel so intensely. They have easier access as it were, to the

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BILL AND MELINDA GATES

whole gamut of feelings available and can be moved as easily by external events – stories, news, other people’s suffering – as those in their own lives.

How do you lead a life that is meaningful and does justice to your talents while at the same time transcending itself and inspiring others? It requires constant access to your creativity without being undermined by it and needs you to be vulnerable and to expose yourself to the uncertainty of not knowing.

As Bill and Melinda Gates put it: ‘Creativity in its broadest sense requires getting comfortable with being uncomfortable: challenging yourself to do things you’ve never done before.’

For this process to be successful, you also need to become comfortable with making mistakes and not being understood by others. These are the times you must refrain from comparing yourself with your peers. Worrying about the judgement of friends and neighbours for example will prevent you reacting creatively when your child has behaved in an incomprehensible way. Self-punishment or shame will merely cut you off from your source and leave your child floundering alone.

Self-compassion: a way out

Recent research offers a way out of the isolation that creatives inadvertently inflict upon themselves. It’s also a surprisingly simple tool to enhance wellbeing by staying closely connected with your core self.

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) is a newly and very cleverly packaged practice that has been around for as long as time itself. Developed and meticulously researched by Kristin Neff (self-compassion.org) and Chris Germer, regular practice of this easy-to-learn approach has astonishingly positive results for long-term health, happiness, motivation, performance and resilience. It has also been shown to improve the immune system because people become healthier and more motivated to look after themselves. War veterans and other people exposed to traumatic events have been shown to develop fewer symptoms of post-traumatic stress than those who have not developed a compassionate inner-nurturer.

Practitioners are encouraged to notice uncomfortable feelings (such as sadness, embarrassment, anger, inadequacy, worry) as they arise, rather than to ignore them by rushing on, or smothering them with strength of mind. The invitation is to connect with the physical sensations of discomfort and attend to them kindly and with interest, in the way one would offer kindness

to a much-loved friend or relative. So stay with your pounding heart or shortness of breath.

The immediate sensation of calm that is generated by this compassionate self-acceptance comes from the bonding effect of an increase in oxytocin, an affiliative chemical that makes you feel accepted and connected. By simply acknowledging your own suffering and turning towards it in a kindly fashion, you create a secure attachment to yourself. No matter how misunderstood or rejected you might feel by others, this simple tool can instantly help bring you back in touch with yourself. Our brain is not picky. Kindness from another, or kindness from oneself, is measured as ‘safety’.

Inner kindness

The pain you inadvertently inflict on yourself daily reduces the capacity to take risks and grow – it isolates and makes you feel different, the odd one out, and it stops you reaching out.

MSC helps break the power of your inner critic, even on subliminal levels, and helps you to engage with your inner coach who has the courage to turn kindly towards your suffering and accept it as part of the human condition.

By being there for yourself when you succeed and also when you fail, you develop a stable and more consistent sense of self-worth. MSC is a perfect tool to notice your vulnerability as you explore and reach for the stars. Just mind you protect yourself from discouragement or people who don’t have your best interests at heart.

Research shows people who practise MSC become less afraid of failure and more motivated to try things out and persevere. Isn’t that just what creative people need to keep going – an inner kindness and encouragement, a sense of being safe with oneself?

Whether you feel angry at perceived injustice, abandoned after a divorce, frustrated by how a project didn’t quite bear out your inner vision or scared of old age or death – MSC teaches you to be unconditional, accepting and kind to yourself. It teaches you to be mindful of moments when the imagination goes on a wild rampage and is as terrifying as if the scenario were taking place in real life. All you need right then is a generous, compassionate breath into the physical discomfort – a pause that will stop your imagination leading you to catastrophe. You need a compassionate inner-nurturer.

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