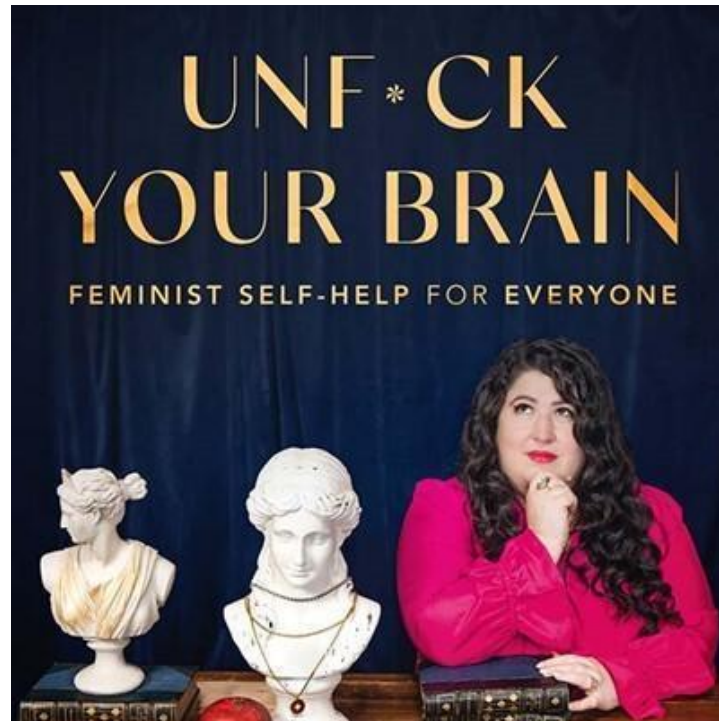


UFYB 440: Self-Compassion Without Self-Pity (Confidence Compass Skill 2)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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The number one concern I hear from clients when I coach them around self-compassion is the idea that it will mean they don't get anything done if they give themselves too much self-compassion. Or if they're too nice to themselves, they're just letting bad behavior slide, or they're becoming a victim if they acknowledge when something's difficult for them. But this is a conflation of self-compassion and self-pity.

Self-pity is self-indulgent and not in the fun way. The way that we indulge in a bad habit, right? Something we know is not serving us or is actively harmful. From a kind of fuck it, don't tell me what to do, who cares about my future self way of thinking.

Self-compassion is a much more rigorous and radical. Self-pity will keep you stuck while self-compassion will help you transform. So today I want to share exactly what self-pity looks like versus self-compassion and how self-criticism fits into this puzzle. I'm going to teach you how to switch from self-pity to self-compassion.

Welcome to UnF*ck Your Brain. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

So, let's do a little word association. What do you think of when you hear the phrase self-compassion? I think of like pastel therapy workbooks or an Instagram post with a flower growing out of some bricks, right? Something very soft and gentle. It's like maybe a little cringe.

I spent most of my life very not interested in self-compassion. I would nod and agree that it was good whenever anyone brought it up because I knew that was the right answer, quote unquote, but I did not have a lot of

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patience for it. It seemed like it was for sad, weak people who couldn't get their shit together. Obviously, I was pretty confused back then, but I didn't know any way to be other than being intensely judgmental and critical about myself and everyone else I had ever met. And because I didn't know how to change my thoughts, my feelings, or my life, I felt very helpless. And so, I only vacillated really between self-pity and self-criticism. Self-compassion seemed like something for like dumb people, right? Like most healthy psychological attributes, the way that I thought back then.

But then maybe 15 years ago, as I started going to therapy more and learning more about my own dysfunctions, I started to see all the ways things I had experienced had shaped me. And I started to contemplate the idea that whatever was wrong with me was not necessarily my fault or not something I had to blame myself for. And instead, like many people, I kind of springboarded from blaming myself for everything to beginning to see myself as a victim of my circumstances: the way I was raised, the systems of oppression around me, right, a woman in patriarchy, a fat person in a fat-phobic society, whatever. And this felt better than self-blame, for sure.

But after a while, it started to feel like a trap in its own way. And I couldn't really figure out how to get out of it because it felt like I had only these two options in my mind. Either I was damaged in some way that was my fault, and so I should blame myself and be ashamed. And theoretically, this might have meant I could change, since supposedly it was my fault, but the blame-shame cycle kept that from happening because it created the identity of like being a fucked up person, which never leads to change. And blame and shame were paralyzing, so you never really change when you're in that space.

If I wasn't to blame, then I was the victim of forces I couldn't control. And so I didn't have to blame myself, but then there was also no way to change my life because I couldn't control the bigger systems and I couldn't change the past. And so if bigger systems or the past were the kind of reasons that I

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was bad or wrong or not okay or my life wasn't what I wanted, then I couldn't do anything about it.

It wasn't until I found coaching and developed more accurate self-awareness that I realized I was conflating self-pity and self-compassion, and that's why I was stuck. So I want to get into the difference today, and I'm going to give you some ways to check which one you're creating with your thoughts. And I'm going to talk about self-criticism because you actually can think of self-pity and self-criticism as the two ends of a spectrum. Those are the two extremes where we just blame ourselves or we just blame everything around us. And self-compassion is a balance between those things.

The primary way you can tell that you are in self-pity instead of self-compassion is how it feels. Self-pity will feel heavy, sad, hopeless. We're not talking about a situation where you are clinically depressed, in which case obviously you want to consult a therapist, a psychiatrist, whatever support you need. Just talking about the feeling created by thinking about ourselves as victims to a world that is unfair and unjust and sort of picking on us and that we are powerless against it.

Now, I don't think there's anything per se wrong with the word victim. I often stay away from the word because I think the concept of, quote unquote, what's called victim mentality is so overused by some pretty terrible coaches and self-help leaders out there to essentially tell people that they cause everything that happens to them. And, you know, if they are grieving something hard or going through a challenging time, they just need to suck it up and tough it out. That's obviously not my vibe.

And I'm a really results-oriented coach. If a word is doing useful things for you, keep it. For some people who have been deep in self-shame or self-blame, recognizing and labeling themselves as a victim is really helpful. It allows them to see more clearly that just because something bad happened

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to them or was done to them doesn't mean they're bad or deserved it or caused it. So for those people, the word can feel really strong, like they're reclaiming their worth and value and they're refusing to accept blame for something they really didn't cause.

For other people, though, when they use the word victim, they feel really powerless, they feel really afraid. They feel put upon, they feel trapped. They feel disempowered. So it's really about like, is it empowering or disempowering when you think that word? How do you feel? As with everything I teach, your mileage may vary. You have to use your own discernment. But regardless of the word victim, self-pity will often feel heavy, it'll feel hopeless, it'll feel helpless, right?

There aren't specific thoughts that are like good or bad that are self-pity or not. It's all about how is it feeling in your body? How is it causing you to show up, right? Even a thought like, "Everyone I know has turned against me." That could be technically true. You could be, you know, someone in a small village who's being shunned. But the self-pity, if the feeling associated with it is heavy and helpless and hopeless, right? Self-pity tells you everything is bad and terrible and wrong and things are unfair to you in a way that they shouldn't be. And self-pity tends to be very myopic, right? It focuses only on what is going wrong or is hard.

It can be completely true that something hard is happening to you that is not happening to other people, and it's usually also true that something good is happening to you or has happened to you that hasn't happened to other people. That doesn't mean you should do what I call gratitude spackling, where you tell yourself you should be grateful. It's just about widening your viewfinder to acknowledge, like a full perspective has balance. We all have good luck and bad luck in different ways, and no one has entirely one or the other. When we're in self-pity, we usually have blinders on and we sort of are only thinking these negative thoughts about

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our lives and what's not working or what's hard. And there's this implicit assumption that it shouldn't be happening.

Self-pity is a lot of emotional resistance to how things are, and it's a self-aggrandizing narrative in its own way, right? That you're like uniquely put upon, that you shouldn't have to go through basically the human experience where wonderful things happen and then also things that are hard happen, things you don't want to have happen, happen, even really, you know, difficult things happen. Self-pity prevents you from taking action to actually solve your problems. And I think it's more common when you don't know that you can control your thoughts and feelings because if you don't know you can change how you think, feel, and act, you don't feel empowered, right? So then, of course, you're more likely to feel self-pity because you don't know that you could feel differently. And so it feels like your life is controlling you.

Self-pity makes you feel like you have no options and there's nothing to be done. And it's incompatible with confidence because it inherently puts you in a kind of subordinate position. It identifies you to yourself as someone who can't show up with courage, who can't solve problems, who doesn't have resilience. So you can't be confident when you are in self-pity. Self-pity always drags you down into insecurity and helplessness. And it's not always obvious because theoretically you could think that you're great and be full of self-pity. Like they don't seem like they're in conflict. But confidence isn't really about thinking you're great. Confidence is about knowing you have the self-efficacy to create the life you want, right? That's what we're talking about in this series. It's a set of skills for showing up fully in your life, and you can't show up fully from self-pity.

Self-compassion feels very different. So after this quick break, I'm going to explain what self-compassion feels like and how to shift from self-pity into self-compassion.

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If self-pity feels heavy and hopeless and almost like a freeze response in the nervous system, self-compassion feels calm. It feels warm, it feels loving, it feels like relief even when things are hard. Sometimes self-compassion can feel emotional. There can be tears or even a feeling of sadness sometimes when we start giving ourselves self-compassion. That's not actually because self-compassion is sad usually. It's because we realize how hard we have been on ourselves previously and it feels sad to know we've treated ourselves poorly. Or it's because we've been trying to keep our feelings inside and self-compassion allows us to experience them. It's like a kid who holds it together at school and then cries when they come home, right? When they're in a safer place.

Self-compassion is understanding without enabling. Pity inherently puts someone under you. We pity people we are looking down on. That doesn't mean we're consciously thinking that they're lower than us, but there is an inherent hierarchy in pity. Even in self-pity, we're seeing ourselves as under and lower than. Self-compassion is grounded in compassion and respect. It's empathy, not sympathy. It's compassion, not pity. It acknowledges our human experience and it offers love and recognition of how hard it can be to be a human having that experience. But self-compassion never robs us of our power or our agency, at least over how we show up. That's why self-compassion is so key to confidence.

If you remember from the last episode, I talked about how accurate self-awareness was the first cornerstone of confidence and of the confidence compass because we have to actually know and understand ourselves in order to show up as ourselves. Self-compassion is required for true self-awareness, right? Self-pity is incompatible with true self-awareness. When we are really self-aware, we are able to see how we are contributing to creating our own experience in the world. We're not causing everything that happens to us, but we are creating our reaction to the world, our emotional and mental experience in the world. Right? It doesn't mean we're responsible for everything that happens to us, but it does mean clarity

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about how we are sometimes responsible for what happens and how we're always responsible for our own reaction.

So self-pity is the opposite of taking responsibility for our reactions to the world and our lives. Self-compassion is acknowledging when things are hard, making space for that emotional experience and being with ourselves through it, but not believing our story about our own powerlessness or helplessness. Self-compassion is clear-eyed. It acknowledges our own humanity, but it doesn't make excuses for checking out, acting against our own values, or giving up. A person filled with self-pity will never feel confident. The entire vibe of self-pity is that you are not powerful. And confidence is about feeling powerful, not power over others, power over yourself and how you show up in the world. Self-compassion is critical for confidence, right? To facilitate true self-awareness, as I said, you have to have self-compassion.

But also, we can't show up powerfully when we are too self-critical. Remember I said that self-criticism and self-pity are kind of two ends of the same spectrum. Self-criticism takes some of the skills of self-awareness, like perspective on your own behavior or analysis of yourself, but it takes them too far. It assumes the worst. It holds you up against unrealistic standards, and it uses abuse to try to motivate change. These things all destroy your confidence.

That's why when we are self-critical, we're always hustling for approval and validation from the outside world. We're trying to mitigate the pain of our self-criticism. So self-compassion is not compatible with self-pity or self-criticism. It is a balance of awareness and compassion. Self-pity is too much empathy without enough self-awareness. Self-criticism is too much critical awareness without enough empathy. True self-compassion balances these two things.

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When you have self-awareness and you have self-compassion, you have two of the four skills you need for living a confident life. And understanding this helps you understand why self-compassion is safe to practice. It is not going to result in you just ignoring all your flaws or letting yourself off the hook for bad behavior. Those aren't terms that I would ever use about myself or anyone else, but I know that these are the thoughts that a lot of you have. Those are the words that your brain uses, so I'm just borrowing them so you can recognize them.

Self-pity is what does those things. Self-pity is what allows you to persist in a delusional story or to let yourself off the hook, quote unquote, or to not change things. Self-pity is all of that empathy, compassion with no awareness. But self-compassion balances empathy and awareness. So you're not going to just become a collection of all your worst attributes if you practice self-compassion, right? It's actually to the contrary. The whole reason that you're reactive or don't follow through or don't show up the way you want is that you're either being self-critical or being self-pitying or both at the same time.

Self-compassion allows you to actually get to know yourself and actually change. It includes the empathy you need to feel safe enough with yourself to get to know your real thoughts. That's the self-awareness piece. And it includes the self-efficacy and self-responsibility piece that allows you to be kind to yourself while also not letting yourself off the hook or giving up on growth and evolution and going after your dreams.

So here's an exercise you can practice to help you pay attention to where you are on the spectrum of self-criticism, self-pity, self-compassion in the middle, and try to move more towards the middle from either direction. Pay attention to or even write down your thoughts about an area that's challenging for you. If the thoughts seem like self-pity, then ask yourself, "How am I making myself powerless with these thoughts? What would I

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need to believe about myself to feel more empowered here? How could I be kind to myself without denying my own agency?"

If the thoughts feel like self-criticism or seem like self-criticism, ask yourself this. Are these thoughts I would want a friend or a child to think about themselves? How could I acknowledge my agency and take responsibility while also being kinder to myself and not trying to take responsibility for things I can't control? What would it sound like if I believed in my own worthiness and goodness, even if I saw ways I'm not being my best self here?

Give these experiments a try and see how they go. I will be back next week to talk about the third cornerstone of the confidence compass, which is self-belief. I'll see you all next week.