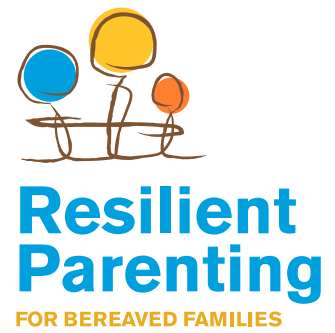


Self-Compassion for Bereaved Families



What is Self-Compassion?

Self-compassion is an important aspect of self-care for parents and caregivers of bereaved children who are going through stressful or painful times. There are three interacting components of self-compassion.

- » **Connectedness:** The first component is understanding that you are not alone in the grief and/or stress you experience in parenting a bereaved child. Grief is experienced by all people following the death of someone they love. It is a normal part of being human and is something you and your children share with all of humanity. In this program you will be hearing the voices of other parents and caregivers of bereaved children.
- » **Mindfulness:** The second component is mindfulness, which is being aware of and open to your experience in the present moment, even when it isn't pleasant. This means noticing painful feelings and thoughts without being overwhelmed by them, criticizing yourself for having them, or feeling that you have to run away from them. Mindfulness is about simply noticing what you are feeling without judgment. This helps you accept yourself as you are, focus your attention on what is happening right now, and calm your mind when you're distressed.
- » **Self-Kindness:** The third component is being kind to yourself in times of stress or grief, rather than being critical or judging yourself harshly. Self-kindness is recognizing when you are hurting and bringing the healing power of kindness to the pain. It is treating yourself with the same kindness you would show to your child or a close friend who was having a difficult time.

The components of self-compassion complement each other. Being kind to yourself is about showing compassion to yourself, similar to the compassion you would show to a close friend or relative who was going through a hard time. Similarly, being aware that you share painful experiences with others allows you to be kind to yourself and not be as hard on yourself over things you do, think, or feel. Mindfulness helps you to be aware of your feelings and thoughts in the present moment, with a non-judgmental, accepting attitude. This non-judgmental attitude leads naturally to being kind to yourself.

Having self-compassion is related to **lower feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression**, as well as **less distressing grief**, and a **greater sense of well-being**.

What Self-Compassion is Not

Now that we've looked at what self-compassion is, let's look at what it is not by discussing some common misunderstandings.

- » **Self-compassion is not being selfish, and it is not self-pity.** Self-compassion recognizes that everyone suffers sometimes and allows you to bring the healing power of kindness to your pain and to others' pain. In fact, self-compassionate people are more caring toward others. When you have compassion for yourself, you model this for your children, helping them to treat themselves with kindness. Research shows that having compassion for yourself is good for your children!
- » **Self-compassion is not weak, lazy, or passive.** It actually takes commitment and courage to have compassion for yourself! When you realize you are hurting, you choose to take steps to soften the pain. This doesn't come naturally for many people - it takes work and practice. Self-compassion also leads to taking greater responsibility for your life, since it focuses on long-term well-being instead of short-term pleasure. Having self-compassion is an inner strength that gives you the motivation and energy to do the things that are important to you, even if it isn't easy. This is a sign of strength, not weakness. Also, motivating yourself with kindness works better than trying to motivate yourself with harsh self-criticism. It is like having a good friend who has your back when things are difficult and encourages you to keep moving toward your goals. Your work on your personal goal is an example of self-compassion in action.
- » **Self-compassion is not about letting yourself off the hook.** It means treating yourself gently when you make mistakes and learning from them, rather than blaming yourself or others. And treating yourself kindly when you fail makes you more likely to try again rather than give up. Self-compassion can actually motivate you to make the positive changes you want to see in your life and your family.
- » **Self-compassion does not ask you to ignore, deny, or try to escape from your pain.** Instead, it generates the desire to ease your suffering with kindness. By bringing compassion to your experience, you can soften the pain.

While offering yourself compassion may feel new and uncomfortable at first, it becomes easier as you continue to do it. The exercises provided in this program are a great way to put self-compassion into action!

Tips for Working with Difficulties with Self-Compassion

Sometimes offering yourself love and care feels good, but other times upsetting thoughts, feelings, and sensations can come up. At times, self-compassion can bring your attention to old hurts and unhealed pain. For example, you may offer yourself a kind phrase and then remember unkind words that were said to you or that you said to yourself. When this happens, you may feel sad, have the thought that you are unworthy of love, or feel discomfort in your body.

These unpleasant feelings are not caused by self-compassion itself, but they can come up as you start to practice self-compassion and begin to feel safe enough to reexperience these feelings. It's like the pain you feel when you start to warm up your hands after they've gone numb from being in cold weather – the pain isn't a sign of a problem and can actually be a good thing.

Fortunately, there are ways to work with difficulties that come up when you practice self-compassion:

- » If the discomfort isn't too strong, you can make space for the difficulties and allow them to be there and continue practicing self-compassion.
- » You can try gently naming the discomfort you are feeling. You can label emotions like sadness, anxiety, or shame and notice where you feel them in your body. You can name them, realize that they are normal, and give yourself kindness like you would a close friend.
- » If there is discomfort in your body, you can offer that part of your body self-compassion, such as by placing a hand there and offering some kind words. You can also switch to noticing a neutral part of your body, like the soles of your feet, or shift your attention away from your body altogether to notice what you see around you or to the sounds that you hear.
- » You can switch to a different self-compassion practice. For instance, if kindness words are bringing up emotional pain or discomfort, you can switch to comforting activities like taking a walk, reading a book, or exercising to help yourself feel better.

