

Escaping the Trap of Perfectionism Through Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is a powerful and transformative practice, explains Jason Liem

In today's fast-paced and competitive world, pursuing success often comes hand in hand with the belief that setting high standards and pushing ourselves to the limit is the only way to achieve our goals.

However, what if I were to tell you that this relentless pursuit of perfection can hinder our success? In this article, we will explore the trap of the highest standards and delve into the transformative power of self-compassion.

Drawing from real-life experiences, research, and insights shared on my podcast, "[It's an Inside Job](#)," we will uncover how embracing self-compassion can lead to sustainable success and wellbeing.

The Predicament of Perfectionism

Let's consider the story of Katya (a pseudonym), a high-powered attorney who firmly believed in the "all or nothing" formula for success. Katya always held herself to the highest standards, thinking they fuelled her best work. However, as time passed, she started questioning whether this relentless pursuit of perfection was worth sacrificing her wellbeing and happiness.

Katya's standards were always on the horizon, perpetually out of reach. As a perfectionist, she constantly needed to outperform others in her competitive industry. Anything less than uncompromisingly high standards felt like a personal failure and conflicted with her deeply ingrained values. The idea of self-compassion seemed foreign and counterproductive.

The Illusion of Perfection

Theodore Roosevelt's famous quote, "Nothing worthwhile comes easy," often leads high achievers to believe that if something truly matters, it must be difficult.



This mindset perpetuates damaging beliefs: the notion that successful people are always busy and exhausted, that superhuman effort is required, and that meeting expectations is never enough – it is essential to exceed them. This all-or-nothing mentality creates a binary view of success, where one must be perfect or be deemed a failure.

During my podcast episodes on self-compassion, I have had the opportunity to interview experts who shed light on the pitfalls of perfectionism. It was eye-opening to discover that many individuals, like Katya, struggle with the trap of the highest standards. This struggle is rooted in the fear that showing oneself kindness and compassion might breed complacency or lead to settling for mediocrity.

The Paradox of Self-Compassion

Why is it so challenging to extend the same compassion to ourselves that we readily offer others? The answer lies in our deeply ingrained beliefs and societal conditioning. We have been taught that being hard on ourselves is the path to success, self-criticism is a necessary motivator, and self-compassion is synonymous with weakness.

In my podcast episodes, I have explored the paradox of self-compassion. While many of us acknowledge the importance of showing support and compassion to others, we struggle to extend that same kindness to ourselves. We fear self-compassion might diminish our drive, make us settle for less, or hinder our ability to achieve great things.

The Price of Perfectionism

Research has consistently shown the detrimental effects of perfectionism on our wellbeing and success. A study conducted by psychologists Hewitt and Flett found that perfectionists often experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. They tend to be excessively self-critical, dismissive of their achievements, and focused on avoiding failure rather than pursuing growth.

Moreover, perfectionism can impair our performance. In another study, published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology*, researchers found that perfectionists procrastinate, struggle with decision-making, and have difficulty adjusting to unexpected challenges. Their rigid and excessively high standards hinder their ability to adapt and thrive in rapidly changing environments.

Embracing Self-Compassion

So, what is the alternative to the trap of the highest standards? The answer lies in self-compassion – a powerful and transformative practice. Self-compassion involves three essential elements: self-kindness, mindfulness, and recognition of common humanity.

Self-kindness

Self-kindness encourages us to replace self-criticism with words of support and understanding. It allows us to acknowledge



our imperfections and mistakes while treating ourselves with kindness and empathy. Instead of criticising ourselves for not meeting impossible standards, we learn to embrace our humanity and extend to ourselves the same compassion we offer to others.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness helps us cultivate a non-judgmental awareness of our thoughts and emotions. By developing a present-moment focus, we can observe our inner experiences without avoidance or exaggeration. Mindfulness enables us to acknowledge and accept our feelings of inadequacy, vulnerability, and failure, allowing us to respond with self-compassion and resilience.

Recognition of common humanity

Recognising common humanity reminds us that we are not alone in our struggles. We all face challenges, setbacks, and moments of self-doubt. Understanding that suffering and failure are universal experiences helps us develop empathy and compassion, fostering a sense of connection with others and reducing feelings of isolation.

The Power of Self-Compassion in Action

Returning to Katya's story, as she integrated self-compassion into her work life, she experienced profound transformations. Embracing self-compassion allowed her to cultivate resilience in facing challenges and setbacks. She no longer viewed these obstacles as personal failures but as opportunities for growth and learning. This shift in perspective fostered a sense of curiosity and openness, which led to increased creativity and innovation within her firm.

Furthermore, Katya's self-compassion positively influenced her relationships with colleagues and clients. By extending kindness and understanding to herself, she developed a greater capacity to offer empathy and support to others. This created a culture of collaboration and psychological safety, where individuals felt safe to take risks, share ideas, and learn from one another.

The Ripple Effect of Self-Compassion

Katya's journey inspired her colleagues to question their pursuit of perfection and its toll on their lives. The workplace transformed into a space where individuals could openly discuss their challenges and support one another in finding sustainable approaches to success. This ripple effect continued as her firm recognised the value of self-compassion in creating a thriving work culture.

In my podcast, I have had the privilege of hosting conversations with experts who highlight the transformative power of self-compassion. These conversations underscore the importance of redefining success, embracing self-compassion, and finding a harmonious balance between striving for excellence and practising self-care.

Embracing Self-Compassion in Organisations

As Katya's firm became aware of the benefits of self-compassion, they started implementing mindfulness programs, wellbeing initiatives, and leadership development focused on nurturing self-compassion. By supporting their employees'

holistic wellbeing, her firm understood that they would unlock their full potential and drive long-term success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, navigating the trap of the highest standards requires a paradigm shift that embraces self-compassion as a catalyst for sustainable success. By cultivating self-compassion, we liberate ourselves from the confines of perfectionism and create a more balanced and compassionate approach to achieving our goals.

Let us reflect on the lessons from Katya's transformative journey. By rewriting the narrative of success and prioritizing our wellbeing, we can forge a new path that leads to fulfilment, flourishing, and sustainable success.

May this article and its wisdom inspire you to cultivate self-compassion and embark on a journey of inner growth and compassionate success. Remember, success is not measured solely by external achievements but also by our inner fulfilment and wellbeing.



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-

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