

Give Yourself a Break

Turning Your **Inner Critic**
into a Compassionate Friend

Kim Fredrickson



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Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

The author has used many of the exercises and self-soothing tools in this book in her counseling practice over the last thirty years. She had made every effort to give credit where credit is due.

Stories shared in this book are a composite of the many ways people are affected by not having compassion for themselves. No story is a direct reflection of a particular person.

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This book is dedicated to my dear family and friends who have been supportive of my ministry to help others heal and reclaim their lives. I send special thanks to my clients over the last thirty years who have helped me to develop compassion and understanding through life's difficulties and triumphs.

A special dedication goes to my dear friends Joany and Betty, who have walked through life with me for more than twenty years with unending support, compassion, and grace. You will both be forever in my heart.

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Introduction

Why Write This Book?

Over my last thirty years as a marriage and family therapist, I have had many, many clients who were very hard on themselves—not because they wanted to be, but because they didn't know what else to do when they failed, made mistakes, made poor decisions, or couldn't foresee the future.

My heart went out to them because I saw them through such different eyes. I saw good people who were doing their best to deal with life. They sometimes succeeded and sometimes failed—just like all of us. What gets us into trouble aren't our failures, but what we do with them. How we treat ourselves when we have unmet needs and encounter failures determines the course of our relationship with ourselves. Many, but not all, of my clients have had a strong belief in God and known that they were forgiven for their sins. However, even with this head knowledge, they didn't always feel forgiven. Instead they felt like they either had to continue to punish themselves for what they'd done, or make up for it because they had no way to let it go.

And so I moved forward with this book when I couldn't find any resources that approached self-compassion (interacting kindly with yourself with both truth and grace) from a faith

perspective. Self-compassion is essential for both handling and recovering from the difficulties of life. Without it, we are vulnerable to the opinions of others, as well as the negative messages from the inner critic most of us carry around inside of us.

My hopes for this book are first, that it provides some understanding of why self-compassion is so hard to extend to ourselves, and second, that it provides hope and practical help in learning to relate to ourselves in healthy and gracious ways.

For some of you, individual reading and practice will be just what you need. For others, working through this with a group of trusted friends will be helpful (see appendix B). And for still others, working through this with a kind and compassionate therapist and/or support group will be what you need.

There are different ways to interact with yourself as you process the material in this book. As you work through it, you may want to get a journal and write down your responses to what you've read as well as your reactions to the compassionate messages and self-soothing exercises. Above all, be kind to yourself as you process this information. Don't be surprised if you have mixed responses. Many of us have not received much compassion in our lives, and while we are thirsty for it we may also have a negative reaction to it. If you are one of the many who have this kind of reaction, use it as a way to validate that this is an area of needed internal growth. Trust that you will benefit from this material, and give yourself the support you need; a therapist or support group can help you process this new way of looking at and interacting with yourself. I have seen many, many men and women grow profoundly in their ability to be compassionate with themselves, and there's no reason you can't too!

I wish you the very best as you process this material either individually or as a group. It is my privilege to facilitate your journey of transforming your inner critic into a compassionate friend. I am also walking this journey as I balance interacting with myself kindly with both grace and truth. Let's start a new path together.

I



Why Self-Compassion Is So Important

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Matthew 14:14

Does this verse strike you the way it strikes me? Take a breath and notice Jesus's response. When Jesus looked out at this large group of people, his response was compassion for them. He met their needs by healing their sick. He didn't judge them, lecture them, or ignore their needs. What if we could look upon ourselves with Jesus's kind of compassion? It would be life-changing.

You picked up this book for a reason. Something in you said, *Yes, I'd like to give myself a break. I'd like to learn to develop a compassionate relationship with myself.* I'm so glad—and you

don't have to go it alone. I will be with you each step of the way as you learn how to understand yourself better. You will find ways to interact with yourself with grace and truth, discover compassionate ways to care for and soothe yourself, and find compassionate words to speak to yourself.

Let's start by defining *self-compassion*.

What it is: compassion is the feeling of pain one feels when another suffers. It is also caring about someone and wishing they not suffer. Self-compassion is having the same concern for our own pain and welfare. Out of self-compassion flow self-care and protection from harm.

What it is not: self-compassion is not self-pity, where we wallow in the shame of what we have done. It is not self-complacency, where we just accept where we are. Instead, it is the idea that we can be kind to ourselves when we fail and treat ourselves with the caring support we would give another who is struggling.

Self-compassion is a balance of truth (*Yes, I made a mistake*) with grace (*I have worth and value, and I will address this mistake directly*).

Self-compassion is absolutely essential for healthy, balanced living. It provides huge benefits including emotional resiliency, stress reduction, contentment, and healthier relationships. Without it we are vulnerable to the opinions of others and find it difficult to deal with and let go of our mistakes. It is tough enough to go through a difficult situation, especially when we think we had a part in creating it. It is another kind of torture to never be able to let go of self-criticism and blame.

Ben was late turning in his quarterly report. *I can't believe I turned in my report late again. I promised myself I wouldn't get behind again. I know my mom's been sick and the basement flooded. That's no excuse! I'm such a loser. I'll never get it right.* When Ben got home from work that day, his dissatisfaction with himself overflowed onto his family as he snapped at his wife, told his daughter to leave him alone, and holed up in his bedroom.

Imagine what it would be like for Ben if he gave himself a break in this situation.

I can't believe I did that again. I told myself I wouldn't. Let me breathe and think about it. What is the truth? I didn't put it off; it was really important to me to have those reports turned in on time. What went wrong? Well, Mom was sick, and I had to take her to ER—twice! Then four days later the basement flooded, and it took me a day and a half to clean that up and fix the problem. I wasn't being irresponsible . . . sometimes "life" just happens. Even though this is true, I want to come up with solutions to get these reports in on time even when "life" gets in the way. Next time I will start these reports a week earlier to give myself extra time, and I will let my boss know if they might be late and why. I'm a good guy who cares about my job and family. Considering all I had to handle, I did an amazing job.

If Ben responded to himself in this way, with compassion, it would naturally flow to his family. What a difference this would make! By becoming an understanding friend to himself as well as taking the time to give himself both grace and truth, Ben would be able to come home and interact with his family differently. He'd arrive home less flustered, be able to explain to his family what had happened at work, and share with them his caring way of talking with himself. As Ben learns to respond to himself in this way, he is experiencing a core truth: it's all about the relationship. The relationship he has with himself impacts all the other relationships in his life whether he wants it to or not.

God Is Our Example

God's heart is tender toward us in our suffering, frailties, and mistakes. He is our perfect example of balancing truth and

grace. He knows we are but dust and is merciful (Ps. 78:38–39). The Bible is full of examples of his compassion toward us and his tenderness to those who are struggling from harm caused by others or by themselves.

Throughout the Bible, God the Father (Old Testament) and Jesus his Son (New Testament) readily had compassion for people when their hearts were open and receptive toward him. When their hearts were hardened, he applied tough love in the hope of softening their hearts so they would come back to him.

We are to model ourselves after God in the way he relates to us. His way is to be drawn to vulnerability and struggle, to respond with compassion and guidance, and to also correct whatever sins or mistakes we've made with grace and truth.

We are often willing to respond to other people with this balanced kindness, but we rarely think that God's example applies to us in the way we interact with ourselves. His grace and compassion apply to each of us individually and collectively. It is wonderful to invest in yourself as you learn to receive compassion from yourself as well as from God.

Inner Peace and Acceptance

When we have compassion for ourselves, our internal negative dialogue goes away. Many people have an ongoing civil war inside their heads. It pains me to even write the words I know many say to themselves: *You're stupid. You're a loser. You should have known better.*

It makes a huge difference when we can balance our response internally after we either make a mistake or regret something we've done or not done. Give this a try: think about a painful moment you had a part in that still hurts when you think about it. Pause to acknowledge the mistake (truth) and also say something encouraging to yourself (grace), such as:

Yes, I wish I'd acted differently. I'm also using this experience for good in order to grow and learn. I can grant myself grace while still doing what is necessary to right this situation. I'm not perfect, and I don't need to be. I am lovable and acceptable even when I make mistakes.

Think what a difference it would make in your life if you responded to yourself in this way. Even now, notice how it feels inside to repeat these words. Let the balance of grace and truth delivered kindly sink in deeply. Breathe it in. Yes, it's true. It is possible to be kind to yourself in this way. We have strengths and wonderful attributes as well as weaknesses. We succeed at times as well as fail. This is part of being human. God knows us in all our positives and negatives and loves us completely. He wants to help us, wherever we are.

We get mixed up about this. We often have difficulty realizing that we are personally designed and created by God and are of great worth and value. At the same time we are imperfect, sinful, and hurtful to others and ourselves. It doesn't have to be either/or. We don't have to turn on ourselves when we see our negatives. We can value ourselves while at the same time commit to doing what is necessary to either repair any damage we caused or move toward growth in a specific area.

Emotional Competency, Resilience, and Balance

When we have compassion toward ourselves, we will be able to tolerate and process our feelings in healthy ways. Studies show that self-compassion increases resilience and self-worth, aids in stress reduction, and helps us recover from painful experiences.¹ These are key elements of emotional competency.

Self-compassion is different from self-esteem. Self-esteem is about assessing yourself in a positive way—often in comparison

to others, which can lead to narcissism (feeling special or better than others). Self-compassion, on the other hand, is a gentle way we relate to ourselves when we're struggling—with kindness, caring, empathy, and understanding.

New research links self-compassion with better health choices and behaviors.² Researchers found that people who eat better, exercise, and have a balance between work and rest do so out of true care for self. This is in direct contrast to attempting these behaviors out of fear, social pressures, or concerns about being compared to others. Changes that are made out of fear or similar motivators rarely last and are often fueled by anxiety, which makes everything worse.

Bad stuff happens—lots of it. Self-compassion helps build resilience, the internal flexibility to rebound and recover from painful, disappointing, and devastating times. Why is this? Because there is a world of difference between going through a difficult time and beating yourself up over and over again and going through that same difficult time while being compassionate and understanding with yourself.

Sherrie put her head in her hands after receiving more bad news. This last year had been rough. First she lost her job when her company downsized, then she had to move to a smaller and more affordable place, and just now she'd received a call from the doctor telling her that her daughter had been diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

Her first thought was to blame herself for this string of events somehow . . . even though she knew in her head such an accusation wouldn't be true. In the past she would have put herself down, eaten a quart of ice cream, and watched television to numb out. But today she took a deep breath and decided to be a compassionate friend to herself with this recent news. Sherrie allowed herself to have a good cry, prayed to God for help and wisdom, and then called a good friend to get the support she needed.

Sherrie also decided to talk to herself compassionately about the rough year she'd had and then come up with a plan to handle this recent news.

This has been a tough year. I've had so much to handle and it seems like the tough times just keep coming. It feels like I can't handle one more thing, but I know God and my family and friends will help me. I am a strong woman who is going through many hardships. I can get the information and support I need to help my daughter and myself get through this new challenge. I will be kind to myself, take care of myself, and lean on God as my strength.

Sherrie felt lighter and less burdened after connecting compassionately with herself. She did some research on the internet to help her know how to softly break the news to her daughter, found an online support group for moms of kids with diabetes, and set up an appointment for her daughter to see the doctor to get started with treatment. Being kind to herself helped Sherrie be more resilient and hopeful, and would continue to help her be an anchor for her daughter as they both tackled this new challenge.

Research shows that self-criticism is strongly linked to depression, which is linked to a lack of resilience.³ People who are self-critical and depressed do not rebound well from the difficulties of life; instead they tend to be very self-focused as they try to survive their depression, anxiety, and the bully beating them up on the inside. Often without meaning to, self-critical people may allow their behavior and attitudes to impact others as well. The effects of living with a depressed and self-critical person can spread to family and friends.

A Friend Inside to Go through Life With

We are with ourselves 100 percent of the time. *The way you interact with yourself has a greater impact on you than any*

interactions you have with others. You have a critically important choice about whom you go through life with. Will it be with a kind friend or a harsh inner critic? If you don't yet know how to be your own friend, you can learn. Imagine being able to comfort and soothe yourself through the difficulties of life. It really is possible!

Lori felt discouraged. This was the third new church she had tried and felt alone in. Even though people seemed to be friendly in general, it seemed like she couldn't break into existing friendships and groups no matter how hard she tried. Lori had tried to get into a women's small group several times, but either wasn't called back, the timing of the group didn't work, or she just didn't feel a part of the group. It was so confusing for her, because in the past she'd made friends easily with the moms of her children's friends at school and through sports. Now that her children were in college and she had switched churches, she felt alone and disconnected.

In an attempt to figure out what the problem was, Lori decided it must be her. Maybe she wasn't friendly or likeable enough, or there was something wrong with her. She was very frustrated, shed a lot of tears, and felt like giving up. But deep down she knew that wouldn't help, so she decided to treat herself with kindness by telling herself some truths.

I am a nice person who's had friends in the past. It hurts to not have many now, and that is a normal reaction. I think a lot of women feel the way I do. Over time my friendships changed as kids grew up, friends moved away, and I started attending a different church. This is a hard time for me and I'm going to be kind to myself rather than put myself down. I'm a loving, kind, and thoughtful person. It's normal for me to be frustrated because I am a relational person who wants to have satisfying friendships. The problem isn't me, the problem is finding other women who feel similar to me, who are able to both give and receive.

I think I'll make an appointment with the women's director at my church and share my experience and get some ideas from her. I think I'll also join a craft class at my local craft store, and sign up for that kayaking class I've always wanted to take. God knows my need, and there is hope. I will ask him to guide me, and I will look for opportunities to be friendly and welcoming to other women who probably feel the same way I do.

Lori felt more hopeful and calm inside as she turned toward herself with understanding and compassion. How wonderful that Lori could separate *feeling* bad from *being* bad. Sometimes we get confused about this. She felt bad because of loneliness from her dwindling friendships. She comforted herself when she felt bad without making herself feel as if she were bad. By turning toward herself with compassion, she became a compassionate friend to herself. This shift can make all the difference in the world!

Get Unstuck

Often, we become stuck because we are divided against ourselves on the inside. Let's say we made a huge mistake at work, with a friend, or with our child. We are truly sorry, we have apologized, and we have done whatever we needed to correct the mistake. Yet we still blame ourselves, talk harshly to ourselves, and can't let it go. We are stuck and have an internal fight going on. The antidote to this is truth with compassion toward ourselves. Here's what you might say to yourself:

Yes, I did the wrong thing. I didn't mean to, and I am very sorry. I'm a good and imperfect person. Everyone makes mistakes, and this won't be the last one. I've done what I needed to do to apologize and make this right. My heart and intentions are good even when I make mistakes. I forgive myself, and I will let this go.

Being able to forgive ourselves for our weaknesses, mistakes, and sins is part of having a compassionate relationship with ourselves. For many of us, we are the most difficult person to forgive. We are much more able to feel compassion and understanding for others than for ourselves. Why is this? It's often because we didn't have the experience of someone giving us the gift of forgiveness or showing us *how* to forgive and be compassionate with ourselves. If we were raised in a family that tended to blame when mistakes were made rather than understand and forgive, we will have a much harder time forgiving ourselves or having a compassionate stance toward ourselves.

Here's an example that happened a number of years ago when my son was thirteen and needed to learn to forgive himself. His eleven-year-old sister was sick and trying to get some extra sleep. He had been very quiet all morning, including showering downstairs, trying not to wake her. Then he put a roll in the microwave and set the timer for three minutes instead of thirty seconds. This caused the roll to smoke and set off our very loud smoke alarm. He was very hard on himself for having done this. It was an opportunity to show him how to forgive himself in this instance.

Here's what I said to him: "Honey, you made a mistake. You never intended to set the timer to the wrong time. You never intended to set the smoke alarm off and wake up your sister. In fact, your intentions were the exact opposite. You've been very quiet getting ready this morning so you didn't wake her up. You are a kind and good boy. You just made a mistake. I know you will learn from it and double-check the timer next time. I love you and forgive you. Now you need to forgive yourself.

"Here's the truth you can tell yourself: 'I'm a good boy who cares about my sister who is sick. I did a great job getting ready so as not to wake her. I made a mistake that woke her up, but I didn't mean to. It was just a mistake. I will apologize to her and be more careful with the microwave next time. I'm a great brother.'"

Notice what it feels like to read this compassionate response. Chances are you've rarely, if ever, received this type of a response when you made a mistake, or have given yourself this type of compassionate response. The good news is that you can learn to be a kind encourager to yourself.

Here's some more help with forgiving yourself. After you have asked God to forgive you, and are "right" with him, allow some of the forgiveness he has given you to wash and cleanse you. Ask yourself some questions to highlight the truth:

- Did I do what I did on purpose?
- Am I truly sorry?
- Have I apologized and asked forgiveness from the person I hurt?
- If my friend did the same thing to someone else, would they deserve to be forgiven? What would I say to them?
- Why am I so surprised by my own sinfulness or imperfections?
- Do I really think I can go through life without making major mistakes and hurting others—even those I love?
- If I feel a nudge to take some action to make things right, what do I need in order to take the next step?

As you read these questions, don't use them to shame yourself. Use them to help you understand yourself and see if there are any steps you'd like to take to make things right regarding the situation you are thinking of. Even taking one small step is progress and growth in the right direction.

Begin to talk lovingly to yourself about what happened. Try to see yourself as God sees you (see appendix A for Bible verses about how God loves us and sees us as valuable and of great worth). Try to have empathy for yourself, without making excuses. If you need to apologize or repair a hurt, give yourself

permission to do so without shame. Imagine yourself as a loving friend to the hurt part of you that can't quite forgive yourself. Come alongside yourself and consider that you can forgive yourself for the wrongs you have done. It is this type of balanced approach that allows self-compassion and truth to bring healing.

Here's some truth you might say to yourself with grace:

Dear Me,

I know you are having a really hard time forgiving yourself for what happened. I know you've tried many times to say you are forgiven, but you haven't felt forgiven. What this tells me is that you are really hurting inside about what you feel your part in this is. I'm here to tell you that you have a gracious, loving God who has forgiven you for all you have done. He is hoping and waiting for the day that you can accept his forgiveness and then extend it to yourself. Don't be surprised by how much you goof up. This is no surprise to God. He doesn't require you to not sin or to somehow be "good enough." He wants you to confess your mistakes to him, ask forgiveness from others, and work hard to turn away from the patterns of sin you fall into.

I have tears of empathy for you as I see your struggle. Some of your inability to forgive yourself may be rooted in the harmful things you did, but some of it may be shame you are carrying from something someone did to you. No matter where this shame came from, it is not too big for God to forgive or for you to forgive yourself. Maybe you aren't ready yet to forgive yourself, but my hope is that soon you will be. If you have confessed these sins to God, God looks at you with complete acceptance and love; there are no barriers between you and him. God has decided that you are forgiven, and I hope you do too. The reality is that forgiving yourself isn't really any different from forgiving someone else. Even if you've done things wrong, and even if you've caused yourself a lot of pain, you can still forgive yourself. I forgive you.

Imagine what it would be like to respond to yourself in such a compassionate way. Notice the balance of grace and truth. Yes, there is something to forgive, and yes, there is grace and understanding that can soothe and heal the regret you feel. Even if it seems impossible to speak to yourself in this way right now, please know that it is possible . . . we've just begun learning this process together. For now, allow yourself to consider that it might be possible, someday.

Concluding Reflections

As we come to the close of this first chapter, take a moment to check in with yourself about how you are doing. God gave us the ability to be aware of ourselves as well as others. He wants us to notice what is going on inside. If you would like, ponder the questions below to help process what you've read:

1. What is your response to the whole idea of having compassion for yourself?
2. What is it like to ponder that God looks at us with compassion and also wants us to approach ourselves with both compassion and truth?
3. What would it be like to go through life with a compassionate friend on the inside rather than a judging bully? In what ways would this make the biggest difference in your life?
4. Do you have trouble forgiving yourself for past mistakes and wrongs done? How might compassion toward yourself help you move toward forgiving yourself?
5. What inner reactions did you notice as you read the compassionate messages to yourself? Which one(s) in particular hit home?