



How self-consciousness can burden our well-being – and how self-compassion can help

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Making efforts to consistently eat a 'healthy' diet and regularly exercise are highly regarded behaviours in Western culture. Individuals who meet restrictive standards of 'health' are valued and admired – often for their elusive powers of control, constraint, and willpower. This concept of *being healthy* has morphed into a narrow, restricted and sometimes obsessive practice that is normalized and widely accepted. Partly because of this high societal standard for health, it is common to feel guilty, ashamed, envious, or embarrassed when an eating regimen is not followed or an exercise session is missed. In fact, it is culturally normative to express feelings of guilt or shame for not sticking to a health trend or to be envious of someone who has more 'discipline'. Feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and envy are a specific set of emotional experiences termed *self-conscious emotions*. These emotions are socially complex cognitive processes that arise when one makes a negative self-evaluation due to a perceived failure to meet an important social goal (e.g., be thin, fit, toned, muscular). They are commonly linked with managing physical appearance and health behaviours. Commonplace statements about health behaviours, *'I really want a second piece of cake but I would feel so guilty'*, *'I'm too embarrassed to run on the treadmill when there are other people around'* and *'If I eat like her, my body can look like that'*, are driven by self-conscious emotions. Research has shown that experiencing these emotions in regards to eating and exercise can detrimentally affect our physical, social, and mental health.

Each self-conscious emotion is unique and distinctively tied to independent behavioural outcomes; however, these emotions are usually felt simultaneously, making them powerful experiences that are difficult to recognize

and in turn alleviate. Although self-consciousness is a natural aspect of the human social experience, some personalities are more prone to experiencing feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment, and envy, and thus at higher risk of developing the associated psychological concerns. In fact, there is substantial evidence in social psychology research to suggest that self-conscious emotions are strong indicators of psychopathology and are highly relevant to weight and food preoccupation, dieting, disordered eating, and obsessive exercise. By better understanding each emotion and its associated characteristics, we can increase our awareness of these experiences and begin to manage the impact of self-consciousness on our well-being.

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SHAME. Shame occurs when individuals fail to meet internalized social standards for what the self should look like. It is accompanied by states of worthlessness, humiliation, and desires to hide or disappear. Feelings of shame appear in many forms. Shame can occur from a specific incident (e.g., feeling ashamed after displaying body in bathing suit) and from chronic states (e.g., feeling ashamed about a flawed or inferior appearance). Individuals who are prone to experiencing body-related shame also have increased

body monitoring, weight rumination, body concern, body image importance, and internalization of the thin ideal, and poorer self-worth, physical self-perceptions and body acceptance. Some researchers consider restrictive eating, bingeing, and obsessive exercise as attempts to regulate feelings of shame.

GUILT. Guilt is linked with tension, remorse, and regret over a specific behaviour. Guilt differs from shame in that it focuses on a negative evaluation of behaviour rather than a negative evaluation of the core self (e.g., feeling guilty for missing a workout vs. feeling ashamed of not being an exerciser). Unlike shame, which can be debilitating, guilt can be motivating to repair the regretful behaviour. But, because of the reparative nature of guilt, it can be highly problematic and fueling for disordered eating. For example, preoccupation and rumination over a negative behaviour such as eating 'restricted foods' or missing a scheduled exercise session can fuel a compensatory guilt-response such as limiting future food intake or overexercising.

EMBARRASSMENT. Unlike shame which is intense and enduring, embarrassment is more fleeting and occurs in response to a specific social and physical transgression in the presence of others. Feelings of embarrassment are elicited when one violates a social norm (e.g., physical fall, losing bodily control, exposing a body part accidentally). Interestingly, research has found that the most common triggers for feeling embarrassed involve the physical body. Embarrassment is linked with feeling exposed, regretful and awkward. For example, many individuals experience embarrassment when exercising in a new environment or with new equipment in the presence of others who may negatively evaluate their behaviour.

ENVY. Making an unfavourable comparison with another individual causes feelings of envy, which are characterized by a sense of inferiority, hostility, resentment, and injustice towards the envied other. Similar to shame, experiences of envy can be intense and enduring, and envy surrounding physical appearance and physical abilities is very common. Specifically, body-related envy is common for individuals who place a high degree of importance on appearance and fitness. Given that restrictive appearance standards are linked with high social standing and that meeting them is highly desired, body-related envy tends to occur when an individual perceives a deficit in a personal physical attribute (e.g., weight) compared to another (e.g., ultra-thin individual).

NEGATIVE IMPACT OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Research evidence suggests that these self-conscious emotions are linked with negative physical and psychological health outcomes. For example, some characteristics of self-consciousness are associated with increased chronic stress, and elevated risk of high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Additionally, individuals who are prone to being self-conscious around appearance and weight are more likely to experience psychological consequences (e.g., lower self-esteem, increased anger, neuroticism, stress) and increased psychopathology (e.g., generalized anxiety, obsessive compulsiveness, depression, anorexia and bulimia symptomatology). Body image consequences (e.g., higher drive for thinness, obligatory exercise, and body monitoring and checking) are also highly correlated with appearance and weight-related self-conscious emotions.

Self-conscious emotions play a very important role in disordered eating, and research has shown that guilt and shame are integral in eating disorder symptomatology. These emotions have been frequently reported in response to restriction, bingeing and purging. Specifically, researchers found an increase in shame during a period of bingeing and purging, followed by a reduction in shame during a period of restriction. Additionally, an increase in anticipated shame was reported in individuals who were concerned about future weight gain. Thereby, self-conscious emotions such as shame play an important role in regulating disordered eating cognitions and behaviours. Notably, traditional eating disorder treatment has not been shown to specifically reduce all self-conscious emotions, namely shame. Due to the pervasive and intense nature of shame in disordered eating, specifically targeting this emotion in a self-conscious framework is very important to improve treatment outcomes. Recent intervention studies have suggested that targeting negative emotional experiences such as shame can help reduce eating pathology and improve recovery outcomes in treatment-seeking individuals. This evidence highlights the importance of recognizing and managing self-conscious emotions around body image and disordered eating.

SELF-COMPASSION INTERVENTIONS

Due to the detrimental impact of appearance and weight-related self-consciousness, finding strategies to reduce self-consciousness is imperative. Recently, researchers have found support for the use of *self-compassion* in reducing the burden of negative self-conscious emotions on overall health and well-being. Self-compassion refers to a method of thought and behaviour whereby individuals treat themselves the same way they would treat a loved one who is going through a difficult time. It means showing kindness to oneself when dealing with a personal failure and reducing self-judgment and criticism for a perceived shortcoming. Based on this definition alone, it is easy to see how self-compassion can be the antidote to excessive self-consciousness around the body, physical appearance, weight, or shape.

Self-compassion involves three main components: (1) self-kindness, (2) common humanity, and (3) mindfulness. Self-kindness refers to being gentle, caring, understanding, non-judgmental, and non-critical towards the self when experiencing a failure, or when feeling inadequate. For example, self-kindness can transform the following shame and guilt-ridden statement *'I'm a failure because I missed every exercise session this week'* to *'I've had a stressful and busy week and I'm practicing self-care by taking time to relax. I'll resume exercising when I'm less busy'*. Similarly, common humanity involves adopting a view that failures and times of suffering are a natural part of the human condition. Common humanity is the recognition that humans are imperfect and that everyone experiences

some degree of suffering in their life. For example, common humanity can be applied to this envy experience *'All my friends are thin and it isn't fair that I always struggle with my weight'* so it becomes *'Everyone experiences struggles with their body image, and times when they don't feel the best. I'm not alone.'* The final component of self-compassion, mindfulness, involves viewing a situation from a neutral perspective, free of judgment or emotion. Difficult emotions are simply observed with a balanced view. By observing difficult emotions and thoughts with openness, individuals can better cope with times of struggle. For example, the following statement *'Today I lost control and ate too many slices of pizza!'* can be transformed into a mindful, neutral, and non-judgmental statement *'Today I ate pizza'*. These components of self-compassion are important in emotion regulation and, used together, they can play a significant role in reducing body image concerns and protecting against eating pathology.

Considering the high value that Western society places on control, constraint, and willpower with regard to fitness and eating behaviours, it is no wonder that feelings of body-related guilt, shame, embarrassment, and envy are commonplace. It is therefore imperative to increase our awareness of how self-consciousness is tied to the body, appearance, weight, and fitness and eating behaviours. By acknowledging and challenging these negative and critical emotions, we can foster kinder and caring thoughts and behaviours towards the self. Adopting a self-compassionate approach can provide freedom from self-consciousness and promote overall well-being.



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SELF-COMPASSION TIPS

Some helpful strategies recommended by self-compassion experts (e.g., Kristin Neff, self-compassion.org) for cultivating self-compassion and reducing negative self-conscious emotions around the body, weight and physical appearance:

1. Imagine what you would do and say to your best friend who was suffering with a body-related concern. Now practice saying and doing the same thing to yourself.
2. Use self-compassionate talk when you experience a sense of personal failure. General statements like 'This is a difficult time', 'Suffering is a part of life that everyone experiences', and 'I'm allowed to give myself the compassion I need' can be individualized to be more effective.
3. Use the warmth of touch for comfort. Soothing self-touch (e.g. hugging yourself, stroking your hand) can trigger the release of the hormone oxytocin that will help to challenge negative feelings.
4. Practice mindfulness. In a difficult time, it will help to focus the mind on the present and centre difficult thoughts. Find a comforting and quiet place to sit, and focus on your breath as it is. Focus on all of your senses and notice all sights, smells, touches and tastes as they are. Notice thoughts and emotions as they enter your mind, allow them to be, then let them pass without judgement.

Breaking old patterns and developing new ones is almost never easy. The key with many self-compassion tools is to continue practicing them, despite any feelings of awkwardness and unfamiliarity, and despite not fully believing kind self-statements. It will take time to challenge automatic self-critical thoughts and foster self-compassion.

FURTHER READING

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