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Self-Compassion: The Way to a Compassionate World

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According to the World Health Organization, about 1 in 4 individuals around the world suffers from a psychiatric condition such as depression, anxiety disorder or a neurological condition [1]. Though each of the psychiatric conditions is linked with biological factors that need to be addressed, however, currently of mounting global mental health concerns that affect at least hundreds of millions of people, we need to concern ourselves also with preventative psychiatry. Preventative psychiatry encompasses not only an exploration of the underlying factors and forces that contribute to the development of mental health problems, but also, primary, secondary or tertiary prevention measures to prevent, ameliorate or reduce the sequelae of such problems.

One such primary prevention effort that may be beneficial is developing self-compassion. The relentless drive for perfection in every sphere of life may facilitate outstanding achievements, but, comes at the cost of individual mental health at times. The neurotic or maladaptive kind of perfectionism may predispose individuals to depression, according to a recent study by Ferrari and team [2]. Such perfectionism may be accompanied by excessive self-criticism, in turn leading to feeling bad about self, which may, in turn, manifest in the form of low mood, criticism of others or even bullying or abuse. Kristen Neff and team as well as Ferrari's study have shown that self-compassion may be an antidote to the maladaptive kind of perfectionism [2,3]. Self-compassion has been shown to improve depression in adolescents and adults [4], reduce anxiety, emotional dysregulation and improve life-satisfaction [5]. Longe et al found through fMRI studies that self-reassurance or self-compassion induces neural activity in similar brain areas as are involved in compassion towards others [6]. The roots of such unhealthy patterns of perfectionism are often laid in childhood and adolescence. School systems traditionally focus on grades and high standards of achievement, but, don't always include an emphasis on learning to deal with failure, or to treat self with compassion while being aware of one's weaknesses. Children may be learning at school to perform better and to keep reaching out to achieve more and more, but, don't always learn to value what one has in the current moment or to develop contentment. Due to this and other factors, rates of burnout are high, and our current system of education is not helping to combat the escalating rates of global anxiety and depression, even in countries and regions that are not crisis or poverty ridden.

We need to teach our children and adolescents not only the value of striving for excellence, but, also, the value in learning to treat self with kindness. We would like children and teens to learn that failures and suffering are a part of the human condition, and to develop a healthy and stable sense of self-esteem that is not affected by success or failure in the moment. Psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists are in a unique position to promote preventative efforts amongst schools, parents, teachers and public in this regard.

Compassion to self is closely intertwined with compassion towards others. When there is a deficit of self-compassion, it eventually translates into a drop in compassionate behavior towards others (this may manifest in the form of bullying, abuse, violence or other), contributing to decreased self-compassion among recipients, thereby, creating a vicious cycle.

While utilizing evidence-based medications and psychotherapies is beneficial and essential, let's embark on a journey to contribute to greater contentment in the world through learning and teaching compassion towards self and others. This may not address or prevent all the mental health suffering of the world, but, could help reduce or prevent some of it.

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