



Practicing Self-Compassion



by Noa Kageyama

Performance psychologist Noa Kageyama offers a counterintuitive strategy for becoming more motivated and resilient in the practice room—and less anxious under pressure.

We all know that having bad days in the practice room is normal. Yet the knowledge that failures and setbacks are inevitable does little to ease the frustration of being stuck on a plateau—or even regressing—with no idea how to get back on track. With a big audition on the horizon, waking up and having a bad sound day can make it tempting to mutter “I’m never going to get this” or “It’s hopeless, why do I even bother?”

Of course, this only makes us feel *more* discouraged and increases the likelihood that we’ll put our instruments away and spend the day parked on the couch in our pajamas, eating Cheetos and ice cream sandwiches and watching reruns of *The Office*. We know this won’t help our triple tonguing, but how are we supposed to keep ourselves going when nothing seems to be working?

Is harsh self-criticism the right tactic? Should we berate ourselves for procrastinating, and nitpick every little detail until everything is flawless?

Or is it best to let ourselves off the hook? To make ourselves feel better by playing through a piece that comes more easily to us instead and rationalizing that mistakes are OK because nobody is perfect?

The answer might be, actually, neither of the above.

Self-Compassion and Its Benefits

Psychologists are finding that a third strategy, known as self-compassion, might be the most effective way for us to grow into artists who are not only stronger mentally and emotionally but more capable of realizing our full potential in the long run. Indeed, this and other self-regulation practices like mindfulness, gratitude, and meditation have become increasingly commonplace among elite athletes and performers as sport and performance psychologists have embraced key ideas from the area of positive psychology.

Self-compassion is a skill that involves treating ourselves with more understanding and kindness during challenging times—the Golden Rule in reverse. Brought into mainstream awareness by Kristin Neff, an associate professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, self-compassion has been conceptualized as having three defining characteristics.¹

1. Being kinder toward ourselves vs. being self-critical.
2. Seeing our imperfections as part of what make us human and something we all share vs. feeling shameful and isolating ourselves because there must be something wrong with us.
3. Cultivating non-judgmental acceptance of our painful thoughts and feelings vs. dwelling on and obsessing about our limitations—or, at the other extreme, blocking out all painful thoughts, emotions, and experiences altogether.

An increasing number of studies have found that self-compassion provides numerous and wide-ranging benefits, from greater optimism and happiness to lower levels of anxiety and depression, more satisfaction with life, and less burnout, shame, and fear of failure.

Despite the many benefits, many high achievers and elite performers are hesitant to embrace the practice of self-compassion. Fearful that being more self-compassionate could take away their competitive edge and perhaps *prevent* them from realizing their potential, they express concerns about becoming complacent, getting stuck in a mindset of mediocrity and settling for a lower standard of performance. These are valid concerns. High standards of excellence and strong internal motivation are key characteristics of high-level performers.

So is a regular dose of verbal self-abuse the price high achievers must pay for extraordinary achievement? Or does self-compassion have performance-related benefits for serious musicians as well?

FEAR NUMBER 1: SELF-COMPASSION WILL LEAD TO COMPLACENCY
“...if you’re just accepting every time you fail at something, and you’re like, ‘oh well, it happens to everybody,’ then you sometimes just get stuck in that mindset... If you just disregard self-criticism, then sometimes it’s hard to improve.”²

At first glance it might sound like self-compassion is about letting ourselves off the hook for mistakes, but that’s not the intention. Self-compassion is about cultivating a more constructive response to challenging moments, where instead of massaging our ego by telling ourselves we are awesome or protecting our self-esteem by deciding that we’re a lost cause and avoiding challenges, we simply accept our results for what they are and see them as inevitable speed bumps on the path to our destination.

Self-compassion is about acknowledging that although we didn’t get the result we wanted, our blunders aren’t signs from the universe suggesting we are talentless hacks. Rather, they can be viewed as an invitation to try something different the next time.

EXERCISE: THE RECORDING CHALLENGE

We all know that it’s important to record ourselves, but we often put it off because listening back can be depressing. This exercise will make recording yourself more enjoyable and also challenge you to become more self-compassionate and less judgmental while maintaining a high standard of excellence.

Record yourself performing a piece or excerpt you are working on. Get a pen and paper. Listen back and pause the recording as necessary as you do the following three tasks:

1. Write down the most positive elements—“nice clear attack on the F sharp in measure 14,” “great even trill and transition into the turn,” “pure and warm tone in the opening.” Try to be as specific as possible.
2. Write down specific elements that may not yet be great but that have definitely *improved* relative to past run-throughs.
3. Write down the things that need work—but don’t stop there. Next to each mistake or problem, immediately write down a potential *solution* that might resolve the issue next time.

This exercise will help you accomplish two things. First, it will force you to acknowledge what you are doing well, which will make for a more honest and compassionate appraisal of your playing. Second, it will help you cultivate a more productive solution-focused mindset, versus the less effective problem-focused mindset that comes more naturally.

Self-Compassion and Resilience

Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley, curious to see how self-compassion would affect students' reactions to doing poorly on a test, conducted a study in which participants took a GRE-style antonyms test that was designed to be extremely difficult.³ Would the students buckle down and study more? Or would they shrug it off and study less?

On average, students answered only four out of 10 questions correctly but were given an opportunity to redeem themselves on a second test, for which they were provided a list of words and definitions to study. The students were allowed to study as long as they wanted, but before given the study material, one group of students was given a specific message designed to trigger a more self-compassionate mindset: "If you had difficulty with the test you just took, you're not alone. It's common for students to have difficulty with tests like this. If you feel bad about how you did, try not to be too hard on yourself."

Another group of students was given a slightly different message, to activate a self-esteem-based mindset: "If you had difficulty with the test you just took, try not to feel bad about yourself—you must be intelligent if you got into Berkeley."

A third group received no messages, just the study words and definitions.

The Results

As predicted, there were significant differences among the three groups in terms of how much time they spent studying for the next test.

The self-compassion group studied *longer* than either of the other groups—one-third (33.32 percent) longer than the self-esteem group and half again (50.84 percent) longer than the control group. And as you might expect, those who studied longer got higher scores.

The data from this and related studies suggest that self-compassion increases our belief that a shortcoming can be changed with hard work and—rather than causing us to become complacent—actually *enhances* our motivation to confront our weaknesses and act.

After all, there is a fundamental difference between telling yourself it's no big deal to make mistakes (complacency) and telling yourself that it's OK to slip up every so often because mistakes are a normal part of learning and growth and don't make you a worthless person no matter how embarrassing they can sometimes be (self-compassion). The latter message underscores the idea that the ultimate goal is not to be perfect every time we perform but to relentlessly *trend* toward the realization of excellence.

FEAR NUMBER 2: SELF-COMPASSION MEANS HAVING TO RELAX OUR STANDARDS

*"It's giving yourself a break when you shouldn't be...most people who are like that don't go as far...because they're too easy on themselves...they just accept what they're doing and that's that and that's all they expect from themselves because they think it's good enough."*⁴

EXERCISE: STICKY NOTE MASTERY GOALS

Some find it helpful to question why we feel the need to maintain high standards in the first place. Why do we beat ourselves up for the slightest perceived "failure"? Is it a need for acceptance? To be seen and heard and valued? To prove something to a parent or teacher? To gain the respect of a colleague?

How can we shift away from tendencies to set unreachably high standards to impress others? How can we instead pursue high standards because we care about our craft—because we want to extract meaning and intrinsic value from the act of honing our skills, producing beautiful sound, artfully shaping a phrase, and savoring the process of music-making for its own sake?

Goal setting can play a role in helping to shift our mindset. Specifically, "mastery" goals centered around learning and growth tend to be associated with greater persistence and challenge-seeking than "performance" goals that involve winning prizes, looking good, or gaining esteem in others' eyes.

1. Write down a list of goals and experiences you would like to realize in the next few years.
2. Review your list and ask yourself why you want to achieve each goal. Is it a mastery goal that has inherent meaning to you? Or an ego-based performance goal that will provide only a fleeting moment of satisfaction?
3. Pick out the two or three mastery goals that excite you most, write them down on sticky notes, and post them on your bathroom mirror where you will see them every day.
4. Take a moment every morning to plan out one small step you can take toward realizing one of your goals. Every evening, review your day and give yourself a pat on the back if you took a step forward. If you did not make any forward progress, don't beat yourself up; simply identify how to tweak your approach the next day.
5. When you've accomplished a goal, take the sticky note and stick it on a wall in your practice room as a reminder of all that you've accomplished through your dedication, hard work—and self-compassion!

Many aspects of perfectionism are indeed self-sabotaging. Yet a "good enough" attitude is not necessarily conducive to reaching our potential either. Fortunately, self-compassion doesn't mean we must lower our standards. It doesn't even mean letting go of our perfectionism per se, as researchers have found that a very specific kind of perfectionistic mindset can actually lead to positive outcomes and a higher level of performance and achievement.

Two Dimensions of Perfectionism

There are two main dimensions of perfectionism, each of which appears to have a different effect on not just our mental and emotional health, but our performance too.

One dimension involves having high standards of performance and striving to meet these standards (“perfectionistic strivings”). The other dimension is the worrying we do about mistakes, the disappointment and frustrations of falling short, and the fears about what others will think of us (“perfectionistic concerns”).

The problem is that while perfectionistic strivings are associated with such positive characteristics as greater intrinsic motivation, effort, and satisfaction with life, perfectionistic concerns are associated with greater anxiety, distress, depression, disordered eating, and more.

If you can relate to both parts, that’s because they often go hand in hand. The danger with perfectionism is that most folks who are high in perfectionistic strivings are also high in perfectionistic concerns.

Perfectionism and Performance Anxiety

To parse this out further, a group of Swedish researchers^v categorized elite athlete participants into one of four groups, to see what kind of impact the various combination of perfectionistic dimensions would have on their pre-performance anxiety.

Group 1, “healthy” perfectionists, had high perfectionistic strivings and low perfectionistic concerns. Group 2, “unhealthy” perfectionists, had also had high perfectionistic strivings but also had high perfectionistic concerns. Group 3, “pure evaluative concerns” perfectionists, had low perfectionistic strivings and high perfectionistic concerns. Group 4, “non-perfectionists,” had both low perfectionistic strivings and low perfectionistic concerns.

As you may have guessed, the high/low “healthy” perfectionists in Group 1 had the highest levels of self-confidence and the lowest levels of anxiety. Next in line were the non-perfectionist athletes in Group 4, followed by the “unhealthy” perfectionists in Group 2.

The athletes in Group 3, who were low in perfectionistic strivings but highly concerned with avoiding mistakes and the consequence of failure, were most prone to experiencing performance anxiety.

So if you have ever wondered why you’ve done pretty well in auditions where you went in with low expectations, not really caring how things worked out, this might provide some clues. The ideal, of course, is to go in with high standards and a strong commitment to achieving them but without being overwhelmed by concerns about what the panel will think or the possible outcomes at stake. Because all else being equal, the so-called healthy perfectionist is probably going to outperform the non-perfectionist—and good luck getting into a non-perfectionist mindset on cue anyway.

The results of other studies in this area suggest that athletes high in perfectionistic strivings do indeed outperform athletes who are low in perfectionist strivings—both in practice and in competition settings.

So ultimately, the idea of lowering our standards or perfectionistic strivings is probably not going to help us play at a higher level under pressure. The key lies in finding a way to lower our perfectionistic *concerns*, while keeping our standards of excellence intact.

Final Notes on Self-Compassion

What got you here won’t get you there. Taking a step forward often requires that we let go of a strategy that may have worked in the past but is no longer paying dividends.

For many of us, criticism and judgment feels safer, as this is what we have become accustomed to. However, the research suggests that harsh self-criticism only increases passivity, procrastination, and fear of failure, and that self-compassion may actually be the key to maximizing our potential.

After all, as much as we’d like to avoid making mistakes, that’s simply not going to happen. If the key to reaching our potential lives in our ability to persevere and hang tough when things don’t seem to be going our way, self-compassion can help us acknowledge our missteps, learn from them, and take the necessary steps to “fail better” the next time. ✱

Performance psychologist Noa Kageyama is on the faculty of The Juilliard School and is the performance psychology coach for the New World Symphony in Miami, Florida. A conservatory-trained violinist with degrees from Juilliard and Oberlin, Kageyama now specializes in working with performing artists, teaching them how to utilize sport psychology principles and more consistently demonstrate their full abilities under pressure. For more performance enhancement tips and strategies, visit bulletproofmusician.com.

END NOTES

1. Neff, 2003.
2. Concerns about self-compassion voiced by a competitive athlete, Ferguson et al., 2014.
3. Breines & Chen, 2012
4. Concerns about self-compassion voiced by a competitive athlete, Ferguson et al., 2014.
5. Koivula et al., 2002.

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