



# In stressful times, self-compassion can help physicians thrive

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There are people who are interested in the subject of compassion because they are trying to help people become more compassionate or less narcissistic. But health psychologist Kelly McGonigal, PhD, is more interested in helping those who already have a calling to reduce suffering find a path toward sustainable compassion while remaining engaged in their work.

As a lecturer at Stanford University, McGonigal studies how social connection can promote health, happiness and resilience. Through her work at the Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism, she co-wrote the Stanford Compassion Cultivation Training program. The eight-week educational program, which is part of the university's medical school, is designed to help physicians improve resilience and "feel more connected to others."

McGonigal will address the topic of self-compassion as a plenary speaker at the 2017 American Conference on Physician Health (ACPH). Taking place Oct. 12–13 in San Francisco, the event is hosted by the Stanford University School of Medicine in collaboration with the AMA and the Mayo Clinic. The conference aims to bring together physicians, researchers and others from across the country to help create an organizational foundation to achieve joy in medicine.

## Data support compassion

McGonigal's website touts her as a pioneer in the field of "science-help."

"It's the idea that there are insights emerging from psychology and neuroscience that can help us be more effective and happier and healthier," she told *AMA Wire*®. "It's really about the fun of translating contemporary science into practical strategy, and that's true for compassion and self-compassion as well."

Part of science-help is gaining a better understanding that people are often willing to take on a new idea or practice when there is scientific basis for it, McGonigal said. This can be especially true for physicians because data can show that physicians who have more self-compassion are more resilient, and that training in self-compassion reduces burnout.

"It's nice to have that scientific evidence," McGonigal said. "For example, studies that look at what happens in the brain when you're feeling connected to others can help explain why compassion enhances resilience."

## Changing mindsets, improving self-compassion

At the conference, McGonigal will discuss why self-compassion is vital to physicians' personal resilience.

McGonigal plans to “counter some of the prevailing mindsets that make self-compassion so challenging, like the intense tendency toward self-blame and criticism, a kind of ‘everything falls on me’ mentality that a lot of physicians have, a lack of self-forgiveness, maybe believing self-care is selfish and believing that you should be selfless.”

“We talk a little bit about the mindsets in medicine that make it difficult, why it’s so important, and then practical things for trying to cultivate it,” she added.

Many times, people don’t get a chance to talk about the pressures of work and how difficult it can be when they are hard on themselves. This can also be dealing with mistakes that have been made or feeling the tension between trying to find a work-life balance versus wanting to give their best to their job or family, McGonigal said.

“Part of self-compassion is knowing you’re not alone in whatever you’re struggling with,” she said.

She also hopes to inspire physicians to think about ways they can be more compassionate toward themselves and to view such acts of compassion as a resource instead of an obstacle to being more effective in delivering care or solving problems.

“It’s fundamental to being able to give your best to others,” said McGonigal. “Self-compassion is a way for physicians to improve their health and well-being while also reducing burnout.”

## Use stress as a driving force

In her latest book, *The Upside to Stress*, McGonigal covers how a person’s stress instincts or responses prepare them to engage with life effectively. This is not to suggest that suffering or stress is good for a person, but that physicians and others have instincts and capacities as human beings that are evolved and adaptive.

McGonigal said the key to being good at managing stress is the ability to harness these instincts.

- **Viewing stress as energy.** This is when physicians allow themselves to be mobilized by stress and to face challenges.
- **Activating connection.** Stress will often activate physicians’ desire to connect with others, ask for help and be around other people who share the same problems.
- **Learning and growing.** This is when physicians use a stressful experience for the good, transforming the pain or disappointment into things they value.

“Physicians often connect to No. 1 and three, but not No. 2,” said McGonigal. “That’s part of the reason I like to teach about compassion.”

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