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Susan Stuntzner

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, susan.stuntzner@utrgv.edu

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Self-compassion and Employment Issues of Persons with Disabilities

Self-compassion.....What is it? Why is it of value? How does it relate to the employment needs of persons with disabilities? These are just a few of the questions people might have when they hear the term followed by having it associated with employment and persons with disabilities. For starters, self-compassion is not a topic that has been historically discussed openly, correctly understood, or promoted. Instead, the societal message when faced with difficult life events such as disability, unemployment, and lack of resources (i.e., access, education) has been one of “just man up and deal with it.” Self-compassion offers everyone, including persons with disabilities, a positive and viable alternative.

Self-compassion is based on the understanding that all people know and respect the experience and feeling of personal pain. For most, painful life experiences are something many would rather avoid, perhaps “sweep under the rug.” Yet, it is our familiarity with emotional, mental, and physical pain that unites us all; everyone experiences it and has a desire to be free of it. As a result, people feel compassion for others going through difficult times.

Self-compassion refers to the ability to be kind, tolerant, accepting, loving, forgiving, and patient with oneself when he or she experiences personal, emotional, mental, or physical pain. It helps people accept themselves and be less critical and judgmental when life does not go as planned or intended. Self-compassion holds many benefits for those who understand, embrace, and practice it. For instance, research shows that self-compassion reduces anger, anxiety, depression, feelings of social isolation, negative cognitions, and increases forgiveness, outlook on life, and one’s perception of events. In many ways it is the “missing link” in dealing with difficult and challenging life events which may include the advent of declining health or disability, unemployment or underemployment, or personal loss and grief. Beyond the benefit of being kinder toward oneself, self-compassion helps people extend compassion toward others. The lesson offered by self-compassion is “the more self-compassion a person has within along with the ability to soothe one’s own hurts, the more he or she can extend warmth, generosity, and compassion toward others.” Self-compassion is a gift one can give to oneself and by doing so can be taught or enhanced so it does not require a person to be “born” sensitive, caring, and compassionate toward oneself.

Self-compassion is an invaluable skill and personality trait for persons with disabilities particularly given the numerous societal barriers, attitudes, and injustices (including underemployment or unemployment) they encounter from others who do not understand or who are fearful of what a disability represents to them. Self-compassion can help persons with disabilities learn to be kinder and more accepting of themselves when they experience situations that overtly or covertly imply “they can’t do something” or “they are a second-class citizen” or “they cost too much to employ.” It can also help them view themselves, their situation, and their relationships with others in a more positive way, especially when they are confronted with unkind remarks or societal nuances. Self-compassion is more than a skill; it is an attitude, a philosophy, and a way of life that gives an abundance of gifts to those who embrace it.

Dr. Susan Stuntzner is an Assistant Professor in the Rehabilitation Counseling and Human Services Coeur d’Alene for University of Idaho – Coeur d’Alene. She writes, researches,

and teaches about issues affecting persons with disabilities including: self-compassion, resilience, forgiveness, adaptation to disability, mentorship of women with disabilities, and development of coping interventions. In addition, Dr. Stuntzner infuses and teaches people about self-compassion as a component of resilience in her current “resilience and coping” study taking place in Coeur d’Alene.