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How to live a rewarding life: the psychology of self-compassion and seven tips to help you shine

- Coach and mentor Justine Campbell talks about the strength of vulnerability and not being afraid of failure
- She recommends acknowledging and accepting problems, then disconnecting from them

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If you want to live the best life you can, Justine Campbell (above, with her therapy dog, Mintie) recommends having self-compassion, and acknowledging your problems, but not dwelling on them.

Are you living your life on autopilot? You may be doing OK and coping, but not asking yourself whether you can feel better than OK. Few of us question what might be holding us back from living optimally every day.

Justine Campbell has made a career out of helping people snap out of their stupor. The coach, counsellor and mentor works with individuals who want to solve the issues that prevent them from thriving and living their best life.

“We flourish when we are happy with what and who we are,” says the Australia-born Campbell, who lived in Asia, including Hong Kong, for more than two decades before returning to Australia in 2018. “When we know what we want and need, and are brave enough to be ourselves and live our values, we shine. That’s what it means to thrive.”

Campbell grew up in Sydney in a Lebanese-British family. After leaving university, she moved to Japan to begin a marketing career at a luxury car company, where she stayed for nine years. In 2008, she moved to Hong Kong with her husband, oldest son Ethan, and daughter Allegra.



Brené-Brown is an author and a research professor at the University of Houston in Texas. Photo: Danny Clark

Helping Ethan deal with the struggles of being a gifted child, Campbell was inspired to become a therapist to help other people. She returned to school to get a master’s degree in counselling, and later, a graduate degree in education specialising in positive psychology.

Since 2009, Campbell has been working with clients who want to make a shift beyond just 'ticking the boxes', guiding them to live to their full potential. She follows traditional Western methodologies, but because most of her clients are ethnic Chinese or expatriates living in Asia, she adapts her therapy to suit.

Much of the work Campbell does with her clients is influenced by bestselling author Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston in Texas. Brown has spent the last two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy. Like Brown, Campbell believes that vulnerability is key to authenticity, which is essential to thriving in life.

"Contrary to popular opinion, vulnerability isn't a weakness, but a strength," Campbell says.

"It takes strength to own our feelings, no matter how bad they seem at the time, and to express them. Many of us are afraid of being rejected or shot down, so we suppress our emotions.



If you just go through life checking off boxes and staying under the radar, you're not exactly thriving. But if you put yourself out there and be honest about what you need, you'll notice that life will start to change for the better.

Justine Campbell

"For instance, we might be unhappy in our relationship but we avoid opening up to our partner for fear of getting hurt or our partner leaving us, so we hold back, and in the process continue to put up with the unhappiness. How is that thriving? How is that living authentically? It's not.

"So yes, being vulnerable is scary and difficult, but when you take the risk, that's when the transformation begins.

Campbell also subscribes to the work of Kristin Neff, an author and associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin who studies self-compassion. According to Neff, self-compassion entails being kind to yourself when you suffer, fail or feel inadequate, as opposed to criticising or judging yourself. It's the recognition that suffering and personal inadequacy are part of the human experience. It involves being mindful of our negative emotions without suppressing or exaggerating them.



Kristin Neff is an author and associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

Neff has done substantial research on self-compassion. One study, published in 2008 in the *Journal of Personality*, found that self-compassion was associated with better moods and positive characteristics, including happiness, optimism, wisdom, personal initiative, and curiosity.

"Self-compassion is just as important as vulnerability when it comes to thriving in life, because it helps us move through disappointments, failures and mistakes, builds resiliency and feelings of worthiness, and boosts our ability to handle bumps in the road," Campbell says.

Campbell's life is busy but fulfilling. She's based in Melbourne, where she lives with her three kids aged 16, 12 and nine, and therapy dog Mintie. But she still travels around the world every few weeks to meet clients and see her husband, who lives and works in Hong Kong. She hopes to obtain her PhD and maybe write a book.

Campbell "walks her talk", fully appreciating every aspect of her life, yet always looking for ways to keep learning and improving. She cherishes her role, not only because it is so closely aligned with her values, but also because she enjoys empowering her clients to work through their problems and be better.

“Does the absence of illness mean that you have wellness? No,” she points out.

“Similarly, if you just go through life checking off boxes and staying under the radar, you’re not exactly thriving. But if you put yourself out there and be honest about what you need, you’ll notice that life will start to change for the better. Sure, you risk getting hurt and rejected, but at least you are being true to yourself, and that’s when you start to flourish.”



Accept that there are events you cannot control, and concentrate on doing the best with what you have. Photo: Alamy

Campbell’s seven tips to thrive and flourish

1. Accept that there are things you can’t control. No matter how resilient you are or how good your problem-solving skills, events that are beyond your control may annoy, anger or frustrate you. That’s life. Sometimes, we have to make the best of the situation we’re in and do the best with what we’ve got.

2. Don’t let mistakes or failures stop you trying again. Trying again doesn’t mean you won’t mess up or fail again. There are no guarantees in life, but if you don’t keep trying you won’t know how much you can achieve.

3. Let your values guide you. Your values help you decide what’s important and give you an idea about your needs. Following your values will help you stay true to yourself.

4. Cultivate positive emotions. Take time during the day to think about what’s going right instead of focusing on what’s going wrong.

5. Don’t ignore your strengths. Imagine that life is a small sailing boat. Your problems are like water filling up the boat. Your first reaction may be to drain the boat (symbolic of focusing on your weaknesses), but remember to adjust the sails, too (the sails represent your strengths). Draining the boat may keep it afloat, but if you don’t fix the sails it won’t go anywhere.



Pick your friends wisely: surround yourself with people who support you and accept you. Photo: Alamy

6. Be selective about the company you keep. Surround yourself with people who support you and accept you for who you are.

7. Mind your thoughts. When problems crop up, you may think that life isn’t fair or wonder why bad stuff keeps happening to you. Don’t suppress or dwell on such thoughts. Acknowledge and accept them, and then disconnect from them. The longer you hold on to them, the more energy they drain and the harder it is to move through your problem. Thoughts drive our emotions.

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