The One Word English Sorely Needs

In a scientific dialogue amongst social scientists and the Dalai Lama on *Destructive Emotions*, the notion of American compassion was raised. It was explained that in the West, many people have great compassion for others, yet suffer greatly with low self-worth and self-contempt. Our American understanding of compassion applies only to others and not to the self. On hearing this, the Dalai Lama was incredulous: the very idea of self-loathing was foreign to him. He understands that caring for oneself and others is fundamental to human existence, and to leave out the SELF in the Western view of compassion is a drastic omission. That is, compassion is more than feeling empathy, but a concerned, heartfelt caring; a wanting to do something to relieve the persons suffering. And that holds whether the being involved is oneself, someone else or an animal. Perhaps we need a word that sets our own wellbeing as the highest priority, along with the wellbeing of others.

I have a client I work with who is a self-described “care-aholic” in which she has created a life pattern of putting the needs of others before her own. As she realized her feelings of resentment and anger were getting in the way of her caring approach, she directed her compassion toward herself. Slowly over time she has reclaimed herself and feels empowered and strong, has far more positive emotions and her relationships have improved. She has demonstrated firsthand that self-love is not always egotistical, it involves respecting the self.