

## **Session 2 – Discovering Mindful Self-Compassion**

### **Objectives**

In this session, we will:

- Learn what self-compassion is and what it isn't.
- Become familiar with the link between self-compassion and wellbeing.
- Directly experience the comfort of self-compassion in the body and using language.

### **Before our Session**

- Look over definitions – see below

### **Live Session in Zoom**

- Meditation: Affectionate Breathing
- Exercise: How Do I Treat a Friend?
- Topic: What is Self-Compassion?
- Topic: Physiology of Self-Criticism and Self-Compassion
- Informal Practice: Soothing Touch
- Informal Practice: Self-Compassion Break

### **After our Session**

- Exercise: Hand Gestures
- Exercise: Compassion with Strength
- Topic: Research on Self-Compassion
- Topic: Stress Response and Self-Compassion
- Exercise: What Works for Me
- Home Practice

Physiology of Self-Criticism and Self-Compassion

<https://self-compassion.org/the-physiology-of-self-compassion/>

What is self-compassion?

- Mindfulness
- self kindness
- common humanity

Mindfulness

- We have to notice we're suffering
- turning toward pain in a kind, nonjudgemental way
- opposite of overidentification or avoidance

Self-Kindness

- how would we treat a dear friend?
- Alleviation of suffering
- actively soothing and comforting ourselves
- opposite of self-judgement

Common Humanity [Liz, remember this!!!]

- our own experience of imperfection is universal
- opposite of isolation

Physiology of self-compassion - Paul Gilbert: compassion based therapy

- threat defense system (reptilian brain)
- Amygdala triggered when we perceive threat
- Cortisol and Adrenaline
- Fight, flight or freeze
- Nowadays, threat is to our self-concept; our sense of who we want to be or who we think we are is challenged
- we are the attacker (self-critic) and the attacked

## Physiology of self-compassion

- Mammalian care giving system evolved so that the young would stay close to their mother
- Triggered by
  - Warmth
  - Soothing Touch
  - Gentle vocalizations
- Releases Oxytocin and opiates in both parents and children
- self-compassion counteracts the stress generated by self-criticism
- Development of mammalian caregiving system (affiliative system) is essential in the development of affect regulation. (Paul Gilbert) [[look this up](#)]

## Research on Self-Compassion

### Self-compassion is powerfully linked to wellbeing:

- It is strongly associated with fewer negative states like depression, anxiety, stress, shame (Johnson & O'Brien, 2013; Zessin, Dickhauser & Garbade, 2015), and negative body image (Albertson, Dill-Shackleford & Neff, 2014).
- It is also strongly linked to more positive states like happiness, life satisfaction, and optimism (Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007). It's also linked to better physical health (Friis et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2013).
- By wrapping pain in the warm embrace of self-compassion, negative states are alleviated while positive states are generated.

### Stress Response and Self-Compassion

When the threat-defense system is activated, we feel stress. Self-compassion is an antidote to stress. The following figure illustrates the components of the stress response and the matching components of self-compassion.

| Stress Response | Stress Response Turned Inward | Self-Compassion |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Fight           | Self-Criticism                | Self-Kindness   |
| Flight          | Self-Isolation                | Common Humanity |
| Freeze          | Self-Absorption               | Mindfulness     |

## Misgivings of Self-Compassion

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InDdx9Yk8kl&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InDdx9Yk8kl&feature=emb_logo)

### Exercise – hand gestures

#### Instructions

- Hold your hands out and squeeze your fists. Hold a tight fist for at least 20 seconds so that you start feeling some discomfort.
- Close your eyes and explore how you feel, especially what emotions arise when your fists are clenched.
- This is a metaphor for self-criticism or resistance – what it feels like when we fight with ourselves or our experience.
- Now open your palms, turned upward.
- Notice how that makes you feel.
- This is a metaphor for mindfulness – what it feels like when we accept ourselves and our lives with equanimity.
- Now extend your palms and your arms forward a little bit.
- How does that make you feel?
- This is a metaphor for common humanity – what it feels like when we reach beyond our separate selves and include others.
- Now place one palm in the other, and slowly bring them both to your chest. Feel the warmth and gentle pressure of your hands on your chest. Breathe gently.
- How does that make you feel?
- This is a metaphor for self-kindness, or self-compassion as a whole. When we care for ourselves, it feels good!

### Exercise: Compassion with Strength

Another way to get in touch with how self-compassion might feel in the body is to stand and adopt a “horse stance” of martial arts (tai chi, karate). A horse stance is a wide, stable stance (you can adapt it to be as wide as is comfortable for you) with a low center of gravity. It is a posture of strength, stability, and flexibility—of embodied presence—of being anchored in who we are and what we feel. This position allows us to protect ourselves (to say “NO!” with an outstretched hand), to fight when we need to, to give and receive without being knocked off balance.

## **Self-compassion includes the yin and yang:**

- Yin – nurturing; comforting and soothing oneself
- Yang – supporting; motivating, protecting and providing for oneself

## **Self-Compassion Break**

- This is a moment of suffering
- Suffering is part of being human
- May I be kind to myself

## **Affectionate Breathing Meditation Audio Recording**

<https://chrisgermer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/AffectionateBreathing18.24ckg amplified12-14-14.mp3>

## **Self-Compassion Break Audio Recording**

[https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/self-compassion.break\\_.mp3](https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/self-compassion.break_.mp3)

## **Affectionate Breathing Script**

Please find a posture in which your body is comfortable and will feel supported for the length of the meditation. Then let your eyes gently close, partially or fully. Taking a few slow, easy breaths, releasing any unnecessary tension in your body.

- If you like, placing a hand over your heart or another soothing place as a reminder that we're bringing not only awareness, but affectionate awareness, to our breathing and to ourselves. You can leave your hand there or let it rest at anytime.
- Now beginning to notice your breathing in your body, feeling your body breathe in and feeling your body breathe out.
- Just letting your body breathe you. There is nothing you need to do.
- Perhaps noticing how your body is nourished on the in-breath and relaxes with the out-breath. Now noticing the rhythm of your breathing, flowing in and flowing out. (pause) Taking some time to feel the natural rhythm of your breathing.
- Feeling your whole body subtly moving with the breath, like the movement of the sea.
- Your mind will naturally wander like a curious child or a little puppy. When that happens, just gently returning to the rhythm of your breathing.
- Allowing your whole body to be gently rocked and caressed – internally caressed - by your breathing.
- If you like, even giving yourself over to your breathing, letting your breathing be all there is. Becoming the breath.
- Just breathing. Being breathing.
- And now, gently releasing your attention to the breath, sitting quietly in your own experience, and allowing yourself to feel whatever you're feeling and to be just as you are.
- Slowly and gently opening your eyes.

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## **"Just For Me" by Ana Villalobos**

What if a poem were just for me?

What if I were audience enough because I am,

Because this person here is alive, is flesh,

Is conscious, has feelings, counts?

What if this one person mattered not just for what

She can do in the world

But because she is part of the world

And has a soft and tender heart?

What if that heart mattered,

if kindness to this one mattered?

What if she were not distinct from all others,

But instead connected to others in her sense of being distinct, of being alone,

Of being uniquely isolated, the one piece removed from the picture—

All the while vulnerable under, deep under, the layers of sedimentary defense.

Oh, let me hide

Let me be ultimately great,

Ultimately shy,

Remove me, then I don't have to...

be...

But I am.

Through all the antics of distinctness from others, or not-really-there-ness,

I remain

No matter what my disguise—

Genius, idiot, gloriousness, scum—

Underneath, it's still just me, still here,

Still warm and breathing and human

With another chance simply to say hi,

and recognize my tenderness

And be just a little bit kind to this one as well,

Because she counts, too.

## Soothing Touch

One easy way to care for and comfort yourself when you're feeling badly is to give yourself supportive touch. Touch activates the care system and the parasympathetic nervous system to help us calm down and feel safe. It may feel awkward or embarrassing at first, but your body doesn't know that. It just responds to the physical gesture of warmth and care, just as a baby responds to being cuddled in its mother's arms. Our skin is an incredibly sensitive organ. Research indicates that physical touch releases oxytocin, provides a sense of security, soothes distressing emotions, and calms cardiovascular stress. So why not try it?

You might like to try putting your hand on your body during difficult periods several times a day for a period of at least a week.

### ***Hand-on-Heart***

- When you notice you're under stress, take 2-3 deep, satisfying breaths.
- Gently place your hand over your heart, feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, place *both* hands on your chest, noticing the difference between one and two hands.
- Feel the touch of you hand on your chest. If you wish, you could make small circles with your hand on your chest.
- Feel the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like.

Some people feel uneasy putting a hand over the heart. Feel free to explore where on your body a gentle touch is actually soothing. Some other possibilities are:

- One hand on your cheek
- Cradling your face in your hands
- Gently stroking your arms
- Crossing your arms and giving a gentle squeeze
- Gently rubbing your chest, or using circular movements
- Hand on your abdomen
- One hand on your abdomen and one over heart
- Cupping one hand in the other in your lap

Hopefully you'll start to develop the habit of physically comforting yourself when needed, taking full advantage of this surprisingly simple and straightforward way to be kind to ourselves.

## Mindfulness

- “The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment.” - Jon Kabat-Zinn -
- “Awareness, of the present moment, with acceptance.” - Chris Germer
- “Knowing what you are experiencing, while you’re experiencing it.”

## Acceptance

- “Active, nonjudgmental embracing of experience in the here and now.” - Steven Hayes

## Empathy

- “An accurate understanding of the [another’s] world as seen from the inside. To sense [another person’s] world as if it were your own.” - Carl Rogers

## Loving-Kindness

- “The wish that all sentient beings may be happy.” – Dalai Lama

## Compassion

- “The wish that all sentient beings may be free from suffering.” – Dalai Lama
- “Deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and other living beings, coupled with the wish and effort to alleviate it.” – Paul Gilbert [similar to definition below?]
- [sharon salzberg/Joseph Goldstein say compassion is empathy + how can I help]

## Self-Compassion

- “When we suffer, caring for ourselves as we would care for someone we truly love. Self-compassion includes self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness.” - Kristin Neff

## Self Compassion and Self Esteem

- Self-esteem can be defined as a global evaluation of self-worth – judging yourself as a good person or a bad person. Self-esteem is not a bad thing; it's how we get our self-esteem that can be problematic. Self-esteem is often based on comparisons with others (feeling “special and above average”) and tends to be contingent on success.
- Self-compassion, however, does not entail evaluations of good or bad, but simply involves relating to yourself kindly, especially when you fail or notice personal shortcomings. This means that self-compassion is always available – it doesn’t desert us when we fail – and it fosters feelings of social connectedness rather than social comparison.
- Research shows that compared with self-esteem, self-compassion is less contingent on

things like physical attractiveness or successful performances and provides a more stable sense of self-worth over time. Self-compassion is also linked to less social comparison and narcissism than self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009).

## Optional Extras

- The Space Between Self-Esteem and Self Compassion: Kristin Neff at TEDxCentennialParkWomen  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTZBUSplr4>
- "Compassion and the Blocks, Fears and Resistances to Compassion: The Therapeutic Challenges" Professor Paul Gilbert Presentation, University of Derby, October 2012  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZp5-AHHx4k&list=PLGZ-qBcM2T2YaRvNpcC4kR3rfN2QFZu1R#action=share>

## Misgivings About Self-Compassion

Many people have misgivings or doubts about self-compassion that prevent them from practicing it. It's normal to have some of these misgivings or doubts, or you may know other people who do, or perhaps misgivings will arise as the program progresses.

Typically, misgivings are based on misconceptions about self-compassion. You are invited to test and explore any misgivings you may have during the program.

### Self-compassion is a form of self-pity

- Self-compassion remembers that everyone suffers (common humanity) and doesn't exaggerate the extent of suffering (mindfulness), so is not a "woe is me" attitude.
- Research shows that self-compassionate people are more likely to engage in perspective-taking rather than focusing on their own distress (Neff & Pommier, 2013). They are also less likely to ruminate on how bad things are (Raes, 2010).

### Self-compassion is weak

- Self-compassion is a strength that offers resilience when faced with difficulty.
- Research shows self-compassionate people are better able to cope with tough situations like divorce (Sbarra, Smith & Mehl, 2012), trauma (Hiraoka et al., 2015), or chronic pain (Wren et al, 2012).

### Self-compassion is selfish

- By including oneself in the circle of compassion (a humble agenda!), our sense of separation from others is lessened.
- Research shows self-compassionate people tend to be more caring and supportive in romantic relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013), are more likely to compromise in relationship conflicts (Yarnell & Neff, 2013), and are more compassionate toward others (Neff & Pommier, 2013).

### Self-compassion is self-indulgent

- Compassion wants long-term health not short-term pleasure (just like a compassionate parent doesn't let their child eat all the ice cream they wants, but says "eat your vegetables.")
- Research shows self-compassionate people engage in healthier behaviors like exercise (Magnus, Kowalski & McHugh, 2010), eating well (Schoenefeld & Webb, 2013), drinking less (Brooks et al., 2012) and going to the doctor more regularly (Terry et al., 2013).

## **Self-compassion is a form of making excuses**

- Self-compassion provides the safety needed to admit mistakes, rather than needing to blame someone else for them.
- Research shows that self-compassionate people take greater personal responsibility for their actions (Leary et al., 2007), and are more likely to apologize if they've offended someone (Brienes & Chen, 2012).

## **Self-compassion will undermine motivation**

- Most people believe self-criticism is an effective motivator, but it actually undermines self-confidence and leads to fear of failure.
- Motivation with self-compassion comes from the desire for health and well-being. It provides the emotionally supportive environment needed for change.
- It can be useful to consider the motivational impact of a harshly critical versus kind and supportive coach to make this point.
- Research shows that self-compassionate people are no less likely to have high personal standards; they just don't beat themselves up when they fail (Neff, 2003b). This means they are less afraid of failure (Neff, Hseih, & Dejithirat, 2007) and are more likely to try again and to persist in their efforts after failing (Breines & Chen, 2012).

In addition to the misgivings mentioned above, you may also notice that self-compassion makes you uneasy because you wonder if:

- It will open me too much to the pain in life.
- I will feel pathetic or needy.
- It will cause old hurts to resurface.
- It's hard to practice.
- I feel I don't deserve it.