



St Monica Trust

Self-compassion

By Sarah Nearney



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Introduction

I wrote this booklet as a response to some difficult times I had last year after I was ill with Covid — about a month after my husband had also been ill himself. We found it really stressful and difficult going so quickly into lockdown and being unable to get supplies. We also were some of the first of our friends, family and colleagues to have Covid which felt scary in terms of not knowing what was ahead.

Coming back to work was challenging too. Wearing full PPE was really difficult and made me feel very breathless. Talking things through with managers was very helpful.

I am now using my experiences as a mindfulness practitioner and my learnings from a new Masters degree in Mindfulness. I have learnt so much about myself and have been able to process some of the difficult times I had last year, too. I thought it might be nice to share some of my knowledge about self-compassion and mindfulness with you and I hope you find it helpful.

Best wishes,

Sarah Nearney
Physiotherapist



Self-compassion in difficult times

It is sometimes said (or sung by Billy Ocean in 1985!) that ‘when the going gets tough, the tough get going’. This popular American English proverb seems to suggest that being able to handle difficult times requires us to be ‘tough’ and ‘strong’...but is that actually the case? Does our resilience to tough times come from fighting things head-on or being strong? Or is it, like writers such as Rick Hanson suggest in his excellent book called Resilient, more to do with the growth of inner mental resourcing of qualities such self-worth, kindness and compassion?

In this booklet, I hope to explain a little about what compassion is, and especially what compassion is when we apply to ourselves—namely self-compassion. How practicing compassion by caring for others, our communities and ourselves can enable us to change parts of our brains (neuroplasticity) and enable positive inner resourcing for ourselves. And finally, I hope to offer some practical tips which writers such as Christopher Germer (The Mindful path to Self-compassion) and Kristin Neff (Self Compassion), two very well-known writers in this field, would call the Pathways to Self-Compassion. Ways that we can grow in our own self compassion.



So, what is compassion?

Compassion is described by Paul Gilbert (author of *The Compassionate Mind*) as “Being sensitive to the suffering of self and others with a deep commitment to try to prevent and relieve it” (Gilbert and Choden, 2013)

Compassion is more than sympathy, empathy, kindness – although these could be considered compassionate qualities. Our definition of compassion embraces two different cognitive processes; requiring one part of our mind to notice suffering or pain (in ourselves or others), and the other part of our mind to respond and be motivated to act and help—to either prevent suffering or alleviate the suffering that we have noticed.

“With true compassion” writes Tara Brach in *Radical Compassion*, *“we feel the other person’s experience as our shared human vulnerability. Our urge to help is not doing good; it’s like tending to a wound on our own body”*.

This is an incredibly complex task for the brain, both neurologically and psychologically. It requires us to notice suffering, which is often accompanied by difficult unpleasant emotions—to notice the feelings that witnessing suffering has produced, and importantly to be able to differentiate the suffering of others from that of our own.

Compassion requires emotional robustness, which while not always easy is possible to learn with techniques and practice. For those of us working in care, responding to another person’s needs may indeed be hugely satisfying and often a motivational aspect to our roles, but it can also be very tiring and costly to our inner selves, especially when we might have been dealing with our own personal difficulties or indeed own ill health. Things can then quite quickly become overwhelming. It’s then that we can feel anything but kind, empathic, and sympathetic to anyone around us, including ourselves.

Can our capacity for compassion change?

As discussed in the book *Compassion*, edited by Paul Gilbert, MRI studies have shown that adults showing compassion towards others who were suffering had increased activity in areas of their brain involved with what is known as “prosocial” behaviour or empathy, known the frontal cortex. This research also showed that these areas of the brain are more neuroplastic that has been previously thought. After further ‘compassionate training’ - which included meditation practices such as ‘loving kindness’ (or metta meditation) over a 12 week period as well as education about compassion - there were additional increases in activity in this area of the brain. Additionally, an unexpected finding was that the individuals who undertook this ‘compassionate training’ were also noted to demonstrate increases in positive emotions in themselves.

Other research has gone on to demonstrate that individuals practicing compassion may also show changes in other biological areas such as increases in hormones like oxytocin (produced from hugging, kissing, cuddling and sexual intimacy) which enhance our sense of well-being, lower stress and anxiety. Oxytocin is a hormone that contributes to emotional regulation and an increase in a vast array of other positive emotions. Practicing compassion is also known to activate the vagus nerve (the 10th Cranial nerve), part of our parasympathetic autonomic nervous system which helps the body to relax and to feel calm.

So, it seems that practicing compassion not only benefits others in the form of helping to reduce suffering, it can also improve our own well being.

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Throughout 2020, there were many reports that large numbers of staff in many health care settings were suffering from ‘compassion fatigue’, which is sometimes known as ‘Empathic Distress Fatigue’. This condition is both an emotional and physical exhaustion which contributes to care-givers being unable to feel empathy or act compassionately, both to others or themselves.

Unlike burnout, compassion fatigue can happen suddenly in response to a particular event, in trying to absorb the trauma or emotional stresses of others, or a unique or novel set of circumstances such as those created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Symptoms can include irritability, reduced cognitive ability, anxiety, anger, difficulty sleeping, weight changes, headaches, feelings of self-contempt or self-critical thoughts and even reduced job satisfaction or loss of morale.

If you feel that you are suffering in this way, then it is really important to speak up, maybe in the first instance to a medical practitioner such as your GP. Compassion fatigue is a condition that generally responds well to treatment once the individual has identified the problem and asked for help. If you or a colleague needs some support, please remember the many sources of support available to you:

www.wearesmt.co.uk

We are going to turn now to look at some simple ways to protect ourselves against compassion fatigue and ways to improve compassion for ourselves.

What is self-compassion?

Self-compassion, according to Kristen Neff's well-known book, is about extending compassion to oneself in instances of perceived inadequacy, failure, or general suffering.

According to Neff, self-compassion is composed of three main areas:

1. self-kindness,
2. common humanity, and
3. mindfulness.

There are indeed aspects of self-care within this (such as the benefits of a healthy diet, a balanced work/life/screen time, exercise that's suitable for you etc.) but its actually more than just self-care.

Self-compassion means being able to relate to yourself in a way that's forgiving, accepting and loving even when, in fact especially when, the situation might be less than ideal, such as in during lockdown for example. Self-compassion is about recognising that we are not alone in our struggles or suffering, although these feeling of loneliness are very typical when we are not being very compassionate towards ourselves.

Mindfulness, or being aware of what is happening in the present moment, is an important aspect of self-compassion. Remember that being compassionate is about noticing the suffering (your own or your own responses to someone else's suffering) and then being motivated to act upon it. It can be a difficult and complex task. Some writers such as Tara Brach will consider it from different stages and with an easy to remember tool—read on overleaf.

The RAIN of self-compassion (Tara Brach)

Recognise what is going on (this refers to mindfulness: knowing what you're experiencing while you're experiencing it which could be a critical inner voice, feelings of shame or fear, the squeeze of anxiety or the weight of depression in the body).

Allow the experience, thoughts, emotions, feelings or sensations to be there, just as it is (an active non-judgmental embracing of experience in the here and now).

Investigate with interest and care (responding with compassion, kindness and understanding).

Nurture with self-compassion. (Asking of yourself what you most need, which could mean being ready and prepared to make or take action on even trickiest dilemmas like leaving a difficult relationship, change jobs, maybe even forgiving someone who has caused you hurt).

For more information and opportunity to practise a simple meditation please see: www.tarabrach.com/rain/

Mindfulness helps compassion

Using mindfulness meditations or techniques can help with this ‘noticing’ skill, particularly when minds begin to ruminate or when we notice painful emotions which we may want to then avoid.

Compassion and mindfulness are often referred to as a practice, and I think this is helpful to remember. Just like learning any new skill, it is something that simply gets easier with practice, maybe a little bit of trial and error, not being too harsh on yourself when you feel you’ve ‘messed up’. There are a number of Mindfulness courses available which are usually taught sequentially over an 8-week period. I recommend asking others what they might do and to read books on the subject. At the end of this article there some suggestions for further reading offered, but these are only some of the many wonderful books and websites that you might find helpful.

Indeed, many faith traditions have compassion as a core value so its important to start from where you are now, and what you have already found of help in your life.



I asked the SMT Therapy Team

I asked the SMT Therapy team what they did for themselves when life felt tough. Many of them said they would repeat a little phrase or 'mantra' at work or at home when things felt difficult. A mantra literally means 'tool for the mind'. Used within a wide variety of spiritual traditions, a phrase can open our hearts and minds in the moment to offer inner guidance that is beyond our usual habits of thoughts. But it's important that it's unique for you. You can use these phrases in difficult times, perhaps writing them down somewhere where you can look at them throughout the day. The team's phrases included:

"I just go with the flow"

"Clouds like these will come and go"

"I try not to take life too seriously, and accept what I cannot change"

"We often fall to rise again"

"What will be will be"

"All I can do is my best"

"This is a stressful time, so I will take extra good care of myself"

"My fear is understandable but constantly worrying about worst case scenario isn't helpful"

"Others are suffering too so I know I am not alone in feeling like this"

"Don't get stressed about what you can't change"

"If it doesn't work out it's not exactly the end of the world!"

"If I need to rest, then I will let myself rest without judgement (I can feel so much better after a nap!)"

You may likely have your own versions of something like these too, or perhaps might help you to think about something for yourself.

Others in the team have been really investing in their own well being by having a go at using some of the many mindfulness resources available such as the Insight Timer— insighttimer.com —which is a free app that offers a number of daily meditations.

We have a Therapy team WhatsApp group, that we use to keep in touch, which for the moment has been really helpful when we can't all meet as a team as much as we used to. And of course, (and you knew this was coming!) we would all definitely recommend exercise in some way too... it definitely makes a difference to well-being!



Where can self-compassion begin?

At its most basic level, the practice of self-compassion means not harming ourselves. It can often be easier to notice when we're harming ourselves than it is to discover ways of being nicer to ourselves. Perhaps you could consider the following:

- How do you brush your teeth? Gently? Harshly? Quickly? Without much thought?
- Do you rush around in the morning because you didn't want to get up?
- Do you stay up late, caught up on screen time or binge watching a Netflix series?
- Does your body feel tense or stiff from lack of exercise?
- Do you often feel tired or fatigued?
- Do you overeat? Skip meals?
- Do you give yourself time to cook a meal you know you will really enjoy?
- Do you do things every week out of habit or duty? Or because you really want to?
- Do you often write more on your "To Do" list than you have time for?

If you feel that you are responding 'yes' to one or more of these questions, perhaps a good place to start is to recognise the harm you may be doing to yourself, even unintentionally. Recognise this and then see if you can modify it in some way so that it can feel more kind to yourself.

What can I do to be more self-compassionate?

Christopher Germer describes 5 key ways in which we can bring self-compassion into our lives. These are **physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally** and **spiritually**.

Ask yourself...

- How do you care for yourself physically?
- Can you think of new ways to release the tension and stress that builds up in your body?
- How do you care for your mind, especially when you're under stress?
- Is there a new strategy you'd like to try to let your thoughts come and go more easily?
- How do you already care for yourself emotionally?
- Is there something new you'd like to try?
- How or when do you relate to others that brings you genuine happiness?
- Is there any way that you'd like to enrich these connections?
- What do you do to care for yourself spiritually?
- If you've been neglecting your spiritual side, is there anything you'd like to remember to do?

Remember that when we practice self-compassion we are activating our parasympathetic nervous system via the vagus nerve and hence feel less threatened by our internal pain. Can you use this knowledge in your everyday life at work or at home? Well yes, you can! The Vagus nerve has both motor and sensory fibres which are stimulated by:

1. Smiling
2. Nodding our head
3. Orientating our head and gaze toward others

What can I do to be more self-compassionate?

The fibres of the Vagus nerve (see page 13) pass down from the brain to the body via the pharynx and larynx (which could give a reason for why singing can be so good for ourselves!). It also then supplies the sensory nerves of our face, chest and abdomen.

Next time you feel less than compassionate with yourself or others around you, why not try placing your hand on your heart, or rubbing your tummy or even stroking your face? Even these simple gestures can start to bring changes that can open up new ways to self-compassion, even in difficult times.

I have found that learning new ways of noticing my own suffering, and those around me, has helped me learn more about myself. Although I also recognise that it's still very much work in progress and more practice needed!

Where can I go to learn more?

Books

The Mindful path to self-compassion (2009) Christopher Germer

Self -compassion (2011) Kristin Neff

Mindful Compassion (2013) Paul Gilbert and Choden

Twelve Steps in a Compassionate Life (2011) Karen Armstrong

Resilient (2018) and Hardwiring Happiness (2013) Rick Hanson

Radical Compassion (2018) Tara Brach

Compassion: Concepts, research and applications (2017) Paul Gilbert

Websites

Free daily meditations: www.mindfulnessassociation.net

Free mindfulness app: www.insighttimer.com

Free guided meditations on self compassion: www.self-compassion.org

An excellent video on YouTube Kristen Neff: The Three Components of Self-Compassion: <https://youtu.be/1IU0h0DPu7k>

A short pause practice plus a number of other resources produced by University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine:

www.fammed.wisc.edu/mindfulness/resources

information and opportunity to practise a simple meditation please see:

www.tarabrach.com/rain/

Bath and Bristol Mindfulness courses: www.bath-bristol-mindfulness-courses.co.uk

Bristol Mindfulness: www.wellaware.org.uk

For more support and resources, visit:

www.wearesmt.co.uk



Thank you.

We really do appreciate all you do to help others. Please remember to look after yourself too.

www.wearesmt.co.uk

Our Trust Hub