

6

SESSION 6

Compassion

SELF-CRITICISM

Life can be hard at times. Regardless of our best intentions, sometimes things go wrong, sometimes even very wrong. For instance, 40% of all marriages end in divorce, we miss deadlines, fail to pass an exam, get ill, feel stressed, and the like. How do we usually react to such things? We feel ashamed, we feel guilty, and we often criticize ourselves: “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I do this? Why me?”. The reactions we have towards ourselves are often merciless. A negative judgment about ourselves is often an automatic response to our failure, whereas forgiveness and gentleness are nowhere to be found. It is exactly this gentleness and compassion that are of extreme importance because they have the power to transform all that negativity. The good news is that compassion can be increased through practice.

SELF-COMPASSION

To understand the meaning of self-compassion, it is important to first understand the meaning of compassion in general. First, compassion doesn’t mean that we should be suffering alongside a suffering person or even pity him/her. When we pity someone, we put him in a less dignified position compared to ourselves. Compassion means that we recognize when someone is suffering and that we acknowledge his suffering as well. Suffering may very well create resistance due to the need to relieve the suffering at any cost. When we experience compassion, it is necessary to give up the struggle and resistance against suffering and to accept suffering as a part of life. There is no judgment in compassion, only the realization that bad things happen, that we all make mistakes, and that everyone feels down sometimes.

Self-compassion simply means showing the same compassion towards ourselves that we show to others. When we are self-compassionate, we treat ourselves with kindness and gentleness. Self-compassion is a form of acceptance. Whereas acceptance refers to what is happening to us (the thoughts and feelings we have), the type of acceptance in self-compassion refers to us as individuals experiencing the suffering. Thus, it means accepting ourselves as we are, even in times of suffering.

Compassion is something that comes natural to us and often seems rather obvious. When you injure your finger, you want to nurture the wound, put a band-aid on it,

and let it heal. You might say this is an innate form of self-compassion. Oddly enough though, whenever we're mentally or emotionally "wounded," we often act in a completely different way. Instead of being accepting and gentle, we struggle with our emotions and treat them like they are our enemies. Self-compassion means that we stop fighting with our own emotional pain. Instead, we let it in and respond with loving kindness and understanding. It means that we take care of ourselves like we would take care of someone who is very dear to us.



WHY SELF-COMPASSION?

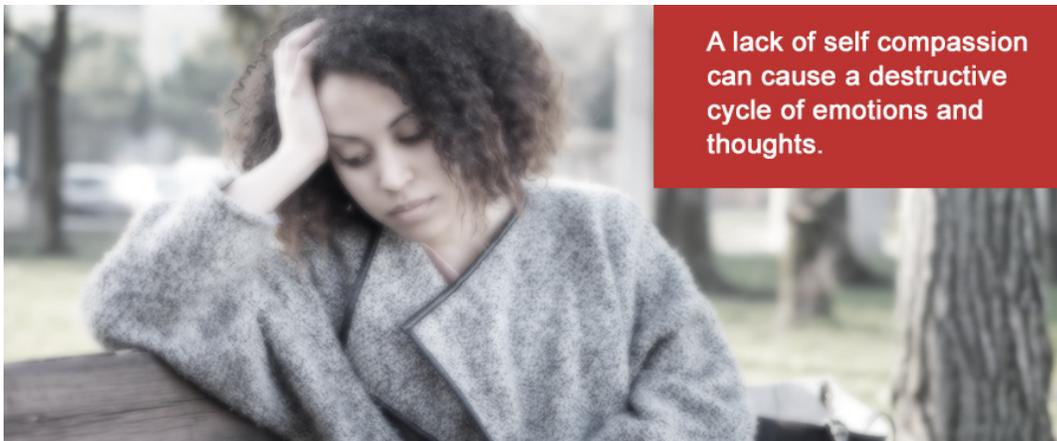
If we fail at something, many of us might use an internal critical voice that punishes us and puts us down. The critical voice in our head is a voice with little gentleness. It lacks compassion. It can demotivate us, make us feel guilty, or cause anxiety.

This critical voice creates internal conflict, for example, because we're not good enough according to this voice. The self-critical voice emphasizes the gap between who we think we are and who we think we are supposed to be. This can result in negative emotions, such as guilt (because we're not good enough) or fear (because we might never be good enough), frustration, and the like. Due to this critical voice, we can easily lose ourselves in a destructive cycle of emotions (guilt) and thoughts (critical voice), which go on endlessly. Thus, without compassion or gentleness, the chance of conflict is fairly large.

More gentleness can help us to be more loving and kind to ourselves. This way, it is less likely that we will get trapped in a negative spiral of emotional thinking and thus experience less negative emotions. More gentleness can also help us perceive the things that happen from a more positive perspective. The uncompassionate

voice says, “What’s wrong with me? How could I ever have let this happen?” Whereas the compassionate voice is kind, caring, and accepts things as they are, wishing that there would be no suffering. It says, “What happened, has happened. You are human, just like everyone else. Another lesson learned, next time I’ll try things differently.” Compassion opens the doors to looking at an experience from the bright side. Because we do not get caught up in a cycle of negative thoughts and emotions (also see session 2 “Automaticity”), we can begin to see that every failure also carries the possibility of success. We can always learn from the things we have done. Every moment is another moment to start all over again. Instead of turning ourselves into a scapegoat, compassion helps us forgive ourselves. Instead of worrying and ruminating, we let go of negative self-thoughts.

Furthermore, it is also rather difficult to empathize with the feelings of other people if we do not tolerate the same feelings (despair, fear, failure, shame) within ourselves. How are we supposed to dedicate our full attention to others when we may be absorbed by our own inner struggle? If we learn to deal with our own distresses in a healthy manner, we will have plenty of room left to devote our attention and energy to other people. Only then we can expand our loving kindness to those around us.



WHY COMPASSION FOR OTHERS?

Compassion for other people enables connectedness (social connection). People have a strong need to feel connected to each other. The feeling that you are loved and trusted and at the same time being able to express your love and trust in others is a fundamental need of human nature (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Research has shown that feeling connected with others enhances psychological and physical

well-being (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003; De Vries, Glasper, & Detillion, 2003; Lee & Robbins, 1998) and reduces the chances of contracting depression and physical illnesses (Hawkley, Masi, Berry, & Cacioppo, 2006). The feeling of being connected with one another increases empathy (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997), cooperation, and trust (Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, & Soutter, 2000).

In their study, Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross (2008) found that by enhancing compassion, feelings of social connectedness and positive emotions towards others were enhanced as well. Participants who practiced a short version of loving-kindness meditation (see the exercise of this week), experienced stronger feelings of social connectedness and positive emotions towards strangers at an explicit (conscious) as well as implicit (subconscious) level.

MINDFULNESS AND COMPASSION

Compassion and mindfulness are closely related. Mindfulness uses the power of attention, whereas compassion uses the power of connectedness. Mindfulness refers to the awareness in the present moment. It is the ability to feel our pain and to allow it and accept it. Instead of going along with the automatic stories created by our mind (“Why all this pain? I don’t want this”, etc.), we create space. The space that is created by mindful attention can be “filled” with compassion. Whenever we are aware and open to any discomforts, it is easier for compassion to come into play. In this state, it becomes easier to accept ourselves as we are.

The space that is created by mindful attention can be “filled” with compassion.

Mindfulness can also help us consciously experience the benefits of practicing compassion. What do we feel when we approach our own pain or the pain of others with kindness? Mindfulness can help us become aware of the true intentions of compassion. Some gestures might seem compassionate although they carry selfish intentions. For example, we have a pet that is very ill or dying. We feel horrible and we experience compassion for the animal. When the pet dies, we cry for several days and experience the pain of losing the pet. Yet if we take a moment to become aware of what we’re feeling, do we experience genuine and sincere involvement for the passing of the animal? Or are we simply crying because

we miss their company? The first scenario shows true compassion, the second one shows us there is a different underlying intention. Such awareness can help us gain an understanding of how sincere our compassion is.

EXERCISE: LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION 1 (SELF)

1. Sit in a comfortable position with your back upright. Close your eyes and start paying close attention to your breath. Remind yourself that every living being wishes to live in peace and happiness. Connect yourself deeply to this desire: "Just as all beings desire to be happy and free from suffering, I am entitled to the same happiness and freedom from suffering." If you wish, you may take a moment to feel what kind of emotions this intention stirs within.
2. Repeat the following sentences in silence and serenity:
 - May I be peaceful
 - May I be healthy
 - May I be happy
3. Take a moment to consider the meaning of each of these sentences. If necessary, repeat a certain sentence a couple of times to create more clarity. You may also choose a word or phrase and repeat it to yourself. It is important that you devote yourself to the wishing-part of the exercise. That you truly wish these things for yourself. In other words, about the focus is on the intention, not the results.
4. If you notice that your mind starts to wander, gently return your attention to the sentences that express compassion, as those above. Don't be harsh on yourself; it is normal to get distracted.
5. Before you finish the exercise, you can also repeat the following sentences in silence:
 - May I and all other beings be peaceful
 - May I and all other beings be healthy
 - May I and all other beings be happy

Practicing this exercise is like being there for a friend who's not feeling well; you may not be able to heal him/her but you are able to give him/her the love and compassion he/she deserves.

EXERCISE: LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION 2 (OTHER)

Loving-kindness meditation can also be aimed at other people. The objects of your meditation can be the following:

- a friend – someone you trust, you are grateful for, and you have positive sentiments for
 - a neutral person – someone you neither like or dislike
 - a difficult person – someone who has hurt you or towards whom you carry negative emotions
 - a group of people – for example, everyone at home or at work.
1. Sit in a comfortable position with your back upright. Close your eyes and start paying attention to your breath. Remind yourself that every living being wishes to live in peace and happiness. Concentrate on a different person (one of the abovementioned examples) and try to keep them in mind. Tell yourself: as am I entitled to be happy and free from suffering, may you be happy and free from suffering as well.
 2. Repeat the following sentences in silence and serenity while keeping this person in mind:
 - May you be peaceful
 - May you be healthy
 - May you be happy
 3. After some time, you can include yourself in the wish:
 - May you and I be peaceful
 - May you can I be healthy
 - May you and I be happy

In some cases, such as when thinking of a difficult person, feelings of aversion, anger, shame, guilt, or sadness can emerge. While experiencing these emotions, the sentences can start to sound hollow and empty. Simply label the emotion you experience (“anger”) and allow it to be there. Focus the exercise for a minute on

yourself again (“May I be happy”). When you start feeling better, you can try using the other person as a focus of your attention again.

ADVICE

Let go of any expectations about how you should be feeling during the meditation. If you feel discouraged by the lack of positive feelings, try to be gentle to yourself and remind yourself that the aim is to focus on the wish, not on creating positive emotions.

Realize that this exercise teaches us to adopt a gentler attitude rather than to reduce or eliminate pain or suffering. You can acknowledge that you (and others) simply do not deserve to experience pain or suffering; instead, you deserve to be utterly happy, even though never experiencing pain or suffering again is unrealistic.

You can also formulate your own sentences. Here are some examples:

- May I love myself as I am
- May I truly be happy
- May I be free from all fear
- May I be free from worries
- Etc.

Try not to formulate too specific sentences, such as “May I get an A for this exam.” Loving-kindness is not an attempt to manipulate our environment with our thoughts.

Loving-kindness meditation can also be integrated with the seated meditation. You could, for example, start or end the seated meditation with words of compassion and kindness. This can also help you bring more gentleness to your meditation practice and put you in a more focused and calm state before you engage in the loving-kindness meditation.

Many times, people will begin to notice rapid changes after completing the loving-kindness meditation. However, a thorough stable change in our attitude is a slow process, which continues to develop over time. Try looking at progress in the long-term, allow yourself to practice and then notice the progress you have made.

TROUBLE SHOOTING

When it is difficult to say the sentences for yourself

- Think of someone who is suffering the same way as you do. Focus your attention on this person first and create sentences accordingly. Gradually, include yourself in the sentences (May [Sandra] be free from all fear..., May [Sandra] and I be free from all fear..., May we....). You can also focus on someone you love very much, such as a child, and then try to remember how you felt when this person was very ill or in pain. Keep in mind the compassion you are experiencing now and include yourself in the exercise again.
- For some people, it is easier to start the exercise in a more abstract way: “May everyone be happy.” Subsequently, you can start to include yourself in the sentences. “May I and everyone else be happy.” It might also help to use your own name instead of “I” (“May [Jan] be happy” instead of “May I be happy”).

When you notice unpleasant feelings emerge during the meditation

- When we allow oxygen to reach a fire after its supply has been blocked off, an explosion occurs. This is called a “backdraft”. The same thing can happen when you practice the loving-kindness meditation. If we carry doubt and hate within ourselves, then the kind words may elicit an explosion of unpleasant or difficult emotions. The exercise does not create these emotions; yet, they are a logical consequence of the way in which we have spoken to ourselves for all these years. Recognize and experience these feelings as they are released. It is a healthy and natural part of the process.
- You can expect unpleasant feelings to arise. When such feelings come to be, recognize your suffering and be compassionate towards yourself by applying the loving-kindness sentences to yourself.
- Try to maintain a balance. If you notice that the negative emotions are getting too strong, do not push through with the exercise. It becomes more of a struggle instead of loving-kindness. You may also turn to the regular seated meditation and simply continue to focus on your breathing.

When the sentences become empty or robot-like repetitions

- Due to repetition, the sentences might become empty or robot-like at some point. This applies to almost every object that receives attention repeatedly. This doesn't mean however that the sentences have to be changed. Instead, it might be helpful to focus on the wishing-part of the sentence and concentrate on the intention instead of the feeling-part of the exercise.

When you feel like the sentences you say are meaningless

- You might feel that the sentences you repeat have no meaning. You might ask yourself, for example, "How is it possible to only experience happiness and never fear? That's not very realistic! Aren't stress and fear part of everyone's life?". This is of course true. The hardest part of this exercise is to understand that its purpose is not to create a positive outcome. A kind attitude is a positive outcome in itself. The true meaning of the sentences is, "Even if it is unrealistic to experience only happiness and never fear, whenever it is possible, let it be so. I truly do not deserve to feel fear but to feel happiness; however, I cannot control what life has in store for me."

When you notice you keep thinking, "I don't really want this other person to be happy because then he will never change."

- Whenever you include someone else in the loving-kindness meditation, it doesn't mean that you tolerate hurtful behavior or that you do not hope this person will not experience the consequences of his/her behavior. You simply hope that this person will be happy.

INFORMATION: LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION

Loving-kindness means tender affection. It is the wish that all beings (you and others) may be happy and good things may come their way. Loving-kindness meditation teaches us to be a better friend to ourselves. It is one way to increase compassion.

The loving-kindness meditation is a form of single-focus meditation. Just as the breath is used as a focal point in the seated meditation, the sentences in the loving-kindness meditation are the focus of our attention. Every time our mind starts wandering, we take notice of this and gently return to the sentences.

The object of the loving-kindness meditation is less important than the attitude we are trying to cultivate through the exercise. By repeated practice, the intention to be loving and compassionate is increased. The brain is taught through repetition to experience that, which is present in each moment. Are you often stressed? Then you are taught stress. Do you experience compassion? Then you are taught compassion.

The loving-kindness meditation has four “healing” elements: intention, attention, emotion, and connection. “Boosting” our intention (“may everyone be happy”) gives us energy and meaning to our lives. The focused attention during the exercise calms our mind (“repeatedly return to the sentences”). The positive emotions that emerge contribute to our happiness and the connection we experience in silence creates a feeling of calmness and safety (feeling less alone, less scared).

Research on compassion shows a clear pattern. People who have more self-compassion feel less depressed and less fearful, and they report higher self-esteem and self-efficacy compared to people who are low on self-compassion (Iskender, 2009; Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, 2003; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). A study by Carson and colleagues (2005) showed that chronic pain patients who followed an 8-week loving-kindness program reported significantly less pain and stress compared to patients who received regular treatment. Another series of studies by Baker and McNulty (2011) showed that self-compassion is associated with higher motivation to correct interpersonal errors and to resolve problems in a constructive manner. Moreover, increased compassion for people has been found to tremendously reduce the thoughts of wanting to punish someone (Condon & Desteno, 2010).

AT HOME

- Do the exercise “three-minute breathing space” about three times a day.
- Become aware of the critical voice in your head this week. Whenever you notice this critical voice, take a moment to notice the tone of this voice. Ask yourself these questions: How do I feel now? What would a dear friend say to me now? See if you can be gentler to yourself.
- Do the loving-kindness meditation as much as you can this week. You may combine it with the seated meditation or body scan. Or you can also opt for a shorter version in which you keep a few people in mind and wish for all of them 3 specific things without doing the elaborate meditation.

LOGBOOK

MONDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation / Loving-Kindness Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Critical Voice		

TUESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation / Loving-Kindness Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Critical Voice		

WEDNESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation / Loving-Kindness Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Critical Voice		

THURSDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation / Loving-Kindness Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Critical Voice		

FRIDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation / Loving-Kindness Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Critical Voice		

SATURDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation / Loving-Kindness Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Critical Voice		

SUNDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation / Loving-Kindness Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Critical Voice		

NOTES
