

Self-compassion

Introduction

Last term we have explored how mindfulness practices can help us relate to painful sensations in a more spacious way. In particular we have seen that it is important to start with bringing kindness and compassion to ourselves when we are in pain, that recognition that we are suffering and that it is hard for us.

But often this does not come naturally to us. If you remember the equation $\text{suffering} = \text{pain} \times \text{resistance}$, we create a lot of suffering for ourselves by resisting what is, the reality of this moment. Our habitual reaction to pain, be it physical or emotional, is to contract, push away, resist. We don't like it and we don't want it. And this resistance adds to our suffering. It's the second arrow that has been described in Buddhist psychology: it is as if we are hit by a first arrow that creates pain (disease, accident, break-up, job loss etc...) and then we hurt ourselves with a second arrow due to our reaction to the first arrow: resisting, avoiding, blaming, obsessing etc... It is very common to do that, we all do it to some extent.

The ideas I will present to you are based essentially on the work and research of Kristin Neff, who has done extensive research in the field of self-compassion with her colleague Chris Germer, at Harvard University.

We will explore the three components of self-compassion, why self-compassion is challenging in our Western culture, the differences in the physiology of self-compassion and self-criticism, and the benefits of self-compassion.

The three components of self-compassion

Self-compassion is a central tenet of Buddhist psychology, and is at the core of all mindfulness practices. When we practice mindfulness, a key supportive attitude is to be kind and patient towards oneself, and to remain mindful of not judging or criticizing oneself for our short-comings during practice.

So, there are three foundational elements to compassion (mindfulness, a sense of common humanity and responding with kindness):

1. **Mindfulness comes first:** we become aware that we are suffering, we are able to recognise our feelings and to admit we are in pain instead of pushing it away, pretending it's not there, or lashing out in anger. As we become mindful of our suffering, we don't get lost in the storyline, we are not overidentified with it. And this is not only about big suffering, but any time we experience difficult emotions.
2. **The second component is our sense of our common humanity:** It's the idea that all human life is imperfect, that all people make mistakes, and are flawed in some way. That's what it means to be human. We know it rationally, but when we fail or make a mistake, our immediate assumption is that something has gone wrong. And it makes us feel very isolated from others. Whereas, when we connect to the fact that suffering is shared and that we are not alone in this, it is part of our human experience, we feel connected.
3. **The third part is to respond with kindness towards ourselves:** when we notice we are suffering, and especially if it comes from failing in some way or feeling inadequate, we have an understanding response towards ourselves, treating ourselves the same way we would treat a good friend.

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The challenge of self-compassion

Most of us have some undercurrent of feeling bad about ourselves, undeserving or deficient in some way, it's very pervasive especially in our Western culture. Jack Kornfield talks of being at war with ourselves. As I speak, you might investigate for yourself: "do I judge myself a lot?" "how do you speak to yourself when you make a mistake or do something wrong?".

We talked about this last term, when we explored the practice of loving kindness or friendliness towards oneself. This message of basic badness or sin originates in our culture and gets exacerbated by our family of origin, especially if we grow up in a family where there is a lot of judgment or criticism, or if some of our needs are not met. When their needs are not met, children tend to think that it's their fault and that something is wrong with them. So that deepens this core of shame and insecurity.

Sometimes, we don't even realise how much we do it, or how many moments of feeling unworthy we have. It impacts everything. When we believe that something is wrong with oneself, it is very difficult to trust a connection with other people, because we fear to be found out. It's hard to take risks, to be creative, to relax and enjoy our moments.

To awaken self-compassion, the beginning is to be able to see that place of vulnerability and pain. The real challenge is getting that it hurts. **The realisation of our own suffering is the beginning of a very profound healing.** We often block that realisation by saying that others have it worse, but when we realise our suffering, we discover a tenderness inside us, and we become able to show kindness and compassion towards ourselves.

The physiology of self-compassion

Self-compassion and self-criticism have a very different physiology.

When we criticize ourselves, we are tapping into the **body's self-defence system, our reptilian brain or limbic system, the flight fright freeze reaction to threat.** So when we fail, or make a mistake or we get rejected, or something difficult happens in our life, we react as if our lives were threatened, and we start criticizing ourselves, attacking ourselves in reaction to the threat. Self-criticism is associated with high adrenaline and cortisol release, a sign of stress, that's the fight response. We also tend to feel isolated and separated from anyone else, turning the flight response inward. We try and isolate ourselves because we feel unsafe, and we ruminate the same thoughts of failure a lot, which is the freeze response.

Self-compassion taps into our **caregiving system**, that developed later on throughout evolution, and resides in our **prefrontal cortex.** When we feel self-compassion we release the hormone oxytocin and opiates that make us feel good and safe. This compassion system is triggered primarily by gentle touch and gentle vocalisation. This is why we always include some form of soothing touch or physical gesture of care and compassion, and some comforting words in a gentle, kind tone of voice during a self-compassion practice.

The five major common misgivings about self-compassion

People worry that self-compassion might be a form of self-pity, that it's weak, that it will undermine our motivation by making us too soft, and will lead to self-indulgence, that it is selfish and self-centred.

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Based on these misgivings, Kristin Neff developed a scale to measure levels of self-compassion in people and created a valid self-report measure to describe the behaviours associated with the presence of self-compassion or the lack of self-compassion. Her research shows that the misgivings on self-compassion are all false.

Self-pity? Self-pity is equivalent to self-focus, rumination and catastrophizing. With self-compassion on the other hand, we ruminate less and are less absorbed in our thoughts (that's the mindfulness part of self-compassion), we are able to step outside of ourselves and see ourselves clearly. Also it is less self-focused because we become aware of sharing our humanity with others.

Weak? A study done with veterans coming back from Iraq showed that their level of self-compassion was more predictive of whether or not they developed PTSD, if they could be an inner ally to themselves or an inner enemy. Self-compassion is a huge source of strength and resilience, and is an important coping mechanism for people going through a difficult time.

Motivation? A number of studies show that students who have self-compassion have less fear of failure, because it is safe to fail, they remain kind to themselves if they fail, so failure does not derail them. They are more likely to learn from the experience, pick themselves up and try again. Growth mindset.

Self-indulgent? Actually, self-compassion encourages people to take good care of themselves. Self-compassionate people exercise more often, eat healthier, go to the doctor more often etc... Studies show that self-compassion is strongly linked to well-being, and positive mind states: so less anxiety and depression and more life satisfaction, gratitude and optimism.

Selfish? Research shows that self-compassion is not selfish, in fact it leads to more giving and caring relationship behaviours. For example, one study on 100 couples showed that self-compassionate partners were described as more caring, capable of intimacy, kinder and less controlling and argumentative.

When people are in a self-compassionate state of mind, they have mindfulness, they feel connected to others and they feel kind, so they have more resources to give to others. As opposed to self-critical people who feel bad about themselves, isolate themselves, and are less in a position to give to others. **Self-compassion creates a state of loving connected presence, that nurtures relationships.**

The risk for backdraft

When people start to practice self-compassion they can actually have a negative reaction to it at first, some form of resistance to it. Chris Germer calls it the **backdraft effect**. It's a firefighting term that describes what can happen in a burning house if you open the doors too fast, letting the air in too quickly, and creating an explosion. So instead firefighters poke little holes around the house to let the air in slowly to avoid the explosion.

If you take that image of the burning house and apply it to people who have experienced difficulties and lots of suffering, especially trauma, it is as though they had to close the door of their hearts to survive. So all the pain and suffering is locked inside their hearts (like the flames in the burning house), and when they start bringing self-compassion towards themselves, the fresh air of compassion rushes in and the flames of the old pain rush out: when we give ourselves unconditional love, all the memories of the ways that we have been unloved come up and come out, all the wounds and pain start releasing. It is a sign that the healing process has begun.

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Therefore, we need to do it slowly so that we don't get overwhelmed. It is helpful to name it if it happens: that's backdraft. It is also useful to go straight to mindfulness when backdraft is occurring without the added components of kindness and love as they can be activating for some people and create more backdraft. So, we stick to basic mindfulness practices such as feeling the breath or feeling bodily sensations. Or we can stop the practice and go for a walk, have a cuppa, pet our cat. In itself it is an act of compassion to pull back so we don't get overwhelmed, and we can take care of ourselves. **By doing so we reinforce the habit of self-compassion – giving ourselves what we need in the moment – planting seeds that will eventually blossom and grow.**

Source: Kristin Neff, book: Self-compassion, and website: <https://self-compassion.org/>