

Developing Qualities of Inner Compassion (Client Handout)

As we have seen from our work together, being self-critical can be very stressful and make us feel worse. One way of coping with disappointment and our 'inner bully' is to learn to be compassionate to the self. This requires a number of things of us:

1. **Valuing Compassion:** Some people are worried that if they are compassionate with themselves they may somehow be weak or lack the drive to succeed. Thus, they don't really value compassion. However, if we think about people who are renowned for their compassion, such as Buddha, Jesus, Ghandi, Florence Nightingale, and Nelson Mandela, they can hardly be regarded as weak or 'unsuccessful'. Learning to be compassionate can actually make us stronger and feel more confident.
2. **Empathy:** Empathy means that we can understand how people feel and think, see things from their point of view. Similarly, when we have empathy *for ourselves* we can develop a better *understanding* for some of our painful feelings of disappointment, anxiety, anger or sadness. This can mean we may need to learn when to be *gently sensitive to our* feelings and distress – rather than try not to notice them or avoid them. Sometimes we tell ourselves that we shouldn't feel or think as we do, and try to deny our feelings rather than working with them. The problem with this is that we don't explore them to understand them and then they can be frightening to us.
3. **Sympathy:** Sympathy is less about our understanding and more about feeling and wanting to care, help and heal. When we feel sympathy for someone, we can feel sad or distressed with them. Learning to have sympathy for *ourselves* means that we can learn to be sad, without being depressed e.g. without telling ourselves that there is something wrong or bad about feeling sad. We can also focus on feelings of *kindness in our sympathy*.
4. **Forgiveness:** Our self-critical part is often very unforgiving, and will usually see any opportunity to attack or condemn as an opportunity not to be missed! Learning the art of forgiveness however, is important. Forgiveness allows us to learn how to change; we are open to our mistakes and learn from them.
5. **Acceptance/tolerance:** There can be many things about ourselves that we might like to change, and sometimes it is helpful to do that. However, it is also important to develop acceptance of ourselves as human beings 'as we are' with a full range of positive and negative emotions. Acceptance isn't passive resignation, such as feelings of being defeated, or not bothering with oneself. It is an *open-heartedness* to all our fallibilities and efforts. It is like having the flu and accepting that you have to go to bed perhaps, but also doing all you can to help your recovery.

6. **Developing Feelings of Warmth:** This requires us to begin to experience and practice generating *feelings* of warmth for the self. To do this we can use images and practice feeling warmth coming into us. When we are depressed this feeling may be very toned down and hard to generate – so we will have to practice. It can seem strange and sometimes even frightening - so we can go step at a time.
7. **Growth:** Compassion is focused on helping people grow, change and develop. It is life enhancing in a way that bullying often is not. When we learn to be compassionate with ourselves, we are learning to deal with our fallible selves, such that we can grow and change. Compassion can also help us face some of the painful feelings we wish to avoid.
8. **Taking responsibility:** One element of compassionate mind work is taking responsibility for one's self-critical thinking. We can learn to understand how and why we became self-critical, often because we felt threatened in some way. Becoming empathic means coming to see the threats that lay behind self criticism. To do this we can learn to recognise when it's happening and then use our compassionate side to provide alternative views and feelings.
9. **Training:** When we attack ourselves we stimulate certain pathways in our brain but when we learn to be compassionate and supportive to our efforts we stimulate different pathways. Sometimes we are so well practiced at stimulating inner attacks/criticisms that our ability to stimulate inner support and warmth is rather under-developed. Hence, now that we have seen how we can generate alternatives to our self-attacking thoughts, we can explore ways to help them have more emotional impact. It does not take away painful realities but it can help us to cope in a different way. The training part can be like going to a physiotherapist, where you learn to do exercises and build up certain strengths. The compassion systems in your brain are the ones we are trying to strengthen with our exercises