

Self-Compassion Skill Practice (Outline)

Before beginning the practice

Place, posture, eyes, duration:

- Quiet, comfortable place to sit free from distractions. Try to use the same place everyday
- Hands comfortably stacked in the lap or on each thigh. Do not roll the shoulders forward
- Erect and comfortable posture. Eyes either closed or partially closed and gazing 2-3 feet forward
- Timer: try starting at 10-15 minutes. Increase time as you become more comfortable

The objects of attention, the “teachers” of attention, and the 3 Regulative Skills:

- Object of attention: the thing you place your attention on (breath)
- 5 things that hinder attention that we can also learn from (desire/liking, aversion/disliking, distraction, frustration, and sleepiness)
- When you notice mind wandering, use the 3 attention-regulating skills: Monitor, Disengage, Redirect
- Show yourself kindness as you are distracted – the mind is built to wander!

Beginning – During the practice

Basic Elements

- Notice sensations of the heart (tingling, tightness, tenderness, swelling, fullness, beating powerfully/quickly, sinking/dropping, heaviness, lightness, aching, fluttering, hardness, tension, warmth, stillness, flooding, etc.)
- Imagine suffering of...
 - A loved one
 - Your “self” (stay here or continue with...)
 - Someone you do not know
 - Someone with whom you have a difficult relationship (feelings of resentment, hatred, animosity, etc.)
- Notice the sensations of the heart again
- Imagine your heart releasing a golden beam of light (or another image that you prefer) that is absorbed by the person suffering. Imagine that light totally and completely alleviating any feeling of suffering or distress replacing it with pure joy and peace.
- Notice the sensations of the heart again

Ending the practice

Take a moment:

- When the timer goes off, especially notice the sensations of the heart and the emotional state. Notice the whole body and the stream of thought.
- Think about how this practice might be used to filter all experiences throughout the day. Imagine what it would be like to sift all experiences through a screen of compassion for the self and for others. What would happen?
- Before getting up, take several deep breaths (breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, etc. 3-5 seconds each)

Self-Compassion Skill Practice (Detail)

Before beginning the practice

Place, posture, eyes, duration:

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit. It should be a place free of most distractions (although any noises you hear can be incorporated into the practice) and not too bright or dark lest you feel over-stimulated or become sleepy. You may want to choose a spot you can use everyday at the same time everyday – this may help your progress. You can choose to sit on the floor or in a chair. Sit with your back comfortably (not rigidly) straight – imagine you are a marionette puppet and there is a string attached to the very top of your head holding up your body (another image is to think of your head as a floating balloon and your spine as the string). This type of posture will aid in maintaining alertness, comfort, and clarity. Set your hands either palms-up in your lap (one on top of the other – e.g. the left hand holding the back of the right hand with both palms facing up) or palms-down on either thigh. Whichever you choose, attempt to stay there throughout the session. This practice is typically done with eyes closed but may be done with eyes slightly open with the gaze angled in the direction of a spot on the floor about 5 feet in front of you. If eyes are kept open, try to keep the visual focus in the air about 2 feet away from you (about the distance of reading a book). Try to set a timer for the session. Choose a duration you think you could manage with only some difficulty (if you don't think you will struggle with 10 minutes, try 15; if you could easily sit for 20, try 30). Remember, the difficulty of concentration practice is what we use to improve our concentration – bringing the attention back after it wanders is the way attention gets stronger. Using a timer will allow you to focus completely on developing the skill of self-compassion instead of wondering how long you have left.

How Self-Compassion differs from other mental skills, the components of Self-Compassion, and the 3 Regulative Skills:

Self-compassion is slightly different than other mental skills practicing. Most notably, this is a skill of creating and sustaining an emotional state rather than simply a high degree of focused or open attention of mental objects while watching emotional state arise and pass away on their own. Self-compassion is also different from something like “self-esteem”. While focusing on building confidence in oneself or developing a sense of self-mastery can sometimes be a benefit, self-compassion has been shown to bring more long-lasting and global benefits to one's mental experience. Self-esteem is often possible because of a *comparative* element that is absent in self-compassion. “Well, if I am not as bad as *that* person, then I must be doing ok” is an example of how self-esteem often works – this is not as helpful (or healthy) as self-compassion.

Compassion can be thought of as a *positive* emotion even though a major component of it is to contemplate the suffering of the self and of others. The reason for this is the fact that compassion includes not only a feeling of desire for self/other suffering to be alleviated, but also a willingness or even an urge to help alleviate that suffering. There are three main components of self-compassion: 1) self-kindness, 2) the sense of having a shared human experience with all others, and 3) mindfulness. *Self-kindness* is essentially increasing positive thoughts toward yourself and decreasing damaging ones (Notice, it is not essential to eliminate negative thoughts about the self – having self-critical thoughts can be a healthy way to assess one's own life. Negative thoughts that are damaging, however, are not simply honest views of the self; they are needlessly or inaccurately self-deprecating or self-loathing). The sense of a *shared human experience* refers to the view that you are not the only one who experiences psychological difficulty or distress. At various times in life, literally EVERYONE IN THE WORLD has trouble with mental-emotional suffering. The feeling can be summarized in the saying “I am not alone”. *Mindfulness* is a general way of stating the habit of being as aware as possible of the events taking place in one's mind. Having “presence of mind” is another way to put it. Paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment to activities, objects, and events within the mind and body is a good working definition of mindfulness.

I will not mention this throughout the description of the skill practices, but whenever the mind wanders (as it inevitably will), recognize the wandering as a result of one of the 5 *hindrances of attention objectivity and clarity* (desire, aversion, sleepiness/lethargy, anxiety/distraction, and doubt) and utilize the 3 *regulative skills* to guide the attention back to the practice of self-compassion. The 3 regulative skills include: *Monitor* (for the wandering of attention), *Disengage* (from the distractions that are “stealing” attention), and *Redirect* (back to wherever you are in the self-compassion practice). These three skills will be very helpful and will be used a lot. Try to view each time you use them as an opportunity to get better at them instead of a set-back or failure.

Beginning – During the practice

Self-Compassion through Other-Compassion

The practice of self-compassion is somewhat different than that of focused attention or bodily awareness practices. In this exercise, the object is to cultivate and sustain the emotional state of compassion towards oneself. Paradoxically, a common way to begin is to first direct compassion toward someone else. This is often a good place to start because it can sometimes be easier to send compassion toward someone you deeply care for and whom you trust and respect. To begin, after you have settled into a comfortable position and posture, begin by noticing the sensations in and around your heart. This can feel cheesy or cliché, but there is truth behind the phrase “listen to your heart” – the heart, lungs, and gastrointestinal tract (known as the enteric nervous system) are all places in the body that are highly innervated by neurons leading to the brain. These areas all give the brain valuable information about the emotional state of the body, and the heart is an important part of this “somatic-emotional” system. As you focus on the heart, something you may notice is that you don’t notice it that much! It actually takes some practice to notice the beating of the heart, so, if you can’t feel it, know that that is typical. Focus on the sensations around the heart area of the chest. Is it warm? Still? Active? Heavy? Tender? Just notice its current state.

Next, begin to think about someone you love, trust, and respect deeply. Imagine that this person (this is the tricky part) is suffering. This is difficult to do, and it seems like the last thing to do when you are trying to cultivate a positive emotion! Stay with that feeling briefly, though, as you will be leading yourself out of it shortly. Before you change it, however, notice the effect that thought had on your heart. Did it start to beat more actively or feel heavier? Maybe there was no change at all; did the change all take place in your head? There is no right way to feel. Simply being aware of the change or non-change is the point. Now, being to imagine that person is being *completely* alleviated of that suffering. Imagine him or her having their entire life turned around for the better. As you imagine this, silently repeat the phrase “*May _____ live free of suffering; may he/she live with joy and peace.*” Repeat this over and over for several minutes as you simultaneously notice the sensations of the heart. An added aid to this practice that can help is to visualize “tangible compassion” being released from the heart in the form of a golden light that shines on your loved one for that person to absorb and become cradled by it. The suffering you previously imagined in your loved one is now totally gone; replaced by pure joy. Stay with that feeling for several moments as you continue to imagine this change in your loved one’s condition. Move again to noticing any changes in the region of your heart. Make note of any sensations or pressures that you feel there: tension, heaviness, fluttering, racing, flooding, pounding, hardness, sunken-ness, tenderness, etc. As you notice these changes, try to simply note them without judgment or labeling them “good” or “bad”.

Self-Compassion

Move from this focus on another (your loved one) to your “self” (view your “self” as your loved one). This can be a more challenging practice because we typically have so many negative things to say about ourselves! Remember the three main elements of self-compassion: self-kindness, a sense of shared human experience, and mindfulness. Now imagine yourself in a state of suffering (this may not be that difficult). You can bring to mind something in your life that elicits suffering, imagine a situation that would produce a suffering response, or simply imagine yourself suffering without a cause. Remember that this imagined suffering should be significant. It can be physical, emotional, mental, or some combination. As your “self” is brought to mind in a state of suffering and distress, notice again the condition of your heart. Did you notice any difference in the sensations of the heart? Stay with whatever feelings you notice. After a few moments, move your attention to imagining the suffering you are “experiencing” to be lifted off of you. As you imagine a total freedom from suffering and distress, repeat the phrase “*May I live free of suffering; may I live with joy and peace*” while visualizing the heart releasing “tangible compassion” in the form of a golden light or a thick mist filling your body to the point that your body is radiating compassion. Absorb this feeling. Let it sink in to all parts of your body and even imagine your mind “absorbing” it: filtering your sensations and your stream of thoughts and feelings through it. As before, notice the heart throughout the several minutes of repeating this phrase. After a few minutes have passed, make a mental note of any differences in your heart sensations. Notice changes in temperature, pressure, pulse speed or strength, weight, or “fullness”. Stay with that feeling for several moments.

Expanding the Compassion Practice

It is at this point that you can decide to continue the self-compassion practice (something you may consider if you are not familiar with it or if you care to work toward increasing self-compassion), or you can move on to “sending” compassion in the same way as above to someone you do not know (like someone you were behind in line at the grocery store, for example) and then to someone with whom you have a great deal of animosity or even hatred toward. Do not brush this last step off too quickly – it can have a transformative effect on the way you relate to that person.

Ending the practice

Take a moment:

After the timer has gone off and you have opened your eyes, notice your physical and mental response to what you just experienced. Notice any differences in your body, stress level, emotional feelings, pace and quality of thinking (racing thoughts, clear mind, or “spacey” brain), memories, and overall states of mind (well-being, anxiety, neutral feelings). Especially focus on your emotional state and the sensations of the heart and enteric nervous system. Try to avoid assessing your “performance”. Being “good at” or “bad at” this skill is not important – the key is to maintain an attitude that allows you to continually return to the object of attention with non-judgment.

The time after self- and other-compassion is can be treated a little differently than other practices. You do not need to think about how to “improve” the practice next time. For this practice, simply reflect on what happened during the time you spend “sending” or “absorbing” compassion. Think of how this practice (allowing compassion to filter all sensations, thoughts, feelings, and mental images) might impact your relationships with yourself, your experience of your surroundings, and other people. Breathe in deeply a few times (breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, etc. 3-5 seconds each) before getting up and continuing with your day.