CULTIVATING COMPASSION FOR COUPLES:

PART I: How Self-Compassion Supports Relationships

PART II: Meeting Spouse/Partner with Compassion in Times of Difficulty

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THE SCIENCE OF SELF-COMPASSION

Self-Compassion

The three components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b)

- Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
  - Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
  - Actively soothing and comforting oneself

- Common humanity vs. Isolation
  - Seeing own experience as part of larger human experience not isolating or abnormal
  - Recognizing that life is imperfect (us too!)

- Mindfulness vs. Over-identification
  - Allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they are
  - Avoids extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings

Physiological underpinnings (Gilbert, 2009)

- Physiological underpinnings of self-criticism
  - Threat defense system
  - Cortisol and adrenaline

- Physiological underpinnings of self-compassion
Mammalian care-giving system

Oxytocin and opiates

Research on self-compassion  Explosion of research into self-compassion over the past decade

- Most research conducted with the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a)

Self-compassion linked to wellbeing (Zessin, Dickhauser & Garbadee, 2015)

- Reductions in negative mind-states: Anxiety, depression, stress, rumination, thought suppression, perfectionism, shame
- Increases in positive mind-states: Life satisfaction, happiness, connectedness, self-confidence, optimism, curiosity, gratitude

Self-compassion vs. self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009)  Offers same wellbeing benefits without pitfalls

- Fewer social comparisons
- Less contingent self-worth
- No association with narcissism

Linked to coping and resilience

- More effective coping with divorce (Sbarra et al., 2012)
- Less likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma (Hiraoka et al., 2015)
- Better coping with chronic health conditions (Sirois, 2015)

Linked to motivation

- Intrinsic motivation, desire to learn and grow (Neff, Hseih & Dejitthirat, 2005)
- Personal standards just as high, not as upset when don’t meet them (Neff, 2003a)
- Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after
failure (Breines & Chen, 2012)

**Linked to personal accountability**

- More conscientiousness (Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007)
- Taking greater responsibility for past mistakes (Leary et al., 2007)
- Disposition to apologize (Howell et al., 2011)

**Linked to health**

- Healthier behaviors (Terry & Leary, 2011)
  - More exercise, safer sex, helps smokers quit, less alcohol use, more doctor visits
- Linked to healthier body image and eating behavior
  - Less body preoccupation and body shame (Albertson et al., 2014)
  - Less likely to binge after blowing diet (Adams & Leary, 2007)
  - Fewer weight worries, less disordered eating (Webb & Forman, 2013)
  - More intuitive eating (Schoenefeld & Webb, 2013)

**Linked to other-focused concern**

- Linked to better romantic relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013)
  - More caring and supportive relationship behavior (as rated by partners)
  - Less controlling and verbally aggressive
- More forgiveness and perspective taking (Neff & Pommier, 2013)
- More compassion, empathy, altruism for others (Neff & Pommier, 2013)
Self-compassion for caregivers

• Less burnout and “compassion” fatigue (Raab, 2014)
• More satisfaction with care-giving role (Barnard & Curry, 2012)
• Increased wellbeing for parents of autistic children (Neff & Faso, 2014)

Family Influences on Self-Compassion

• Attachment security (Wei, Liao, Ku & Shaffer, 2011)
• Parental criticism and conflict in home (Neff & McGehee, 2010)
• History of abuse (Vetesse et al., 2011)

How to Increase Self-Compassion

Mindfulness-Based approaches

• Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy both increase self-compassion (Keng et al., 2012)
• Self-compassion appears to be a key mechanism of program effectiveness (Kuyken et al., 2010)

Compassion Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2010):

• Less depression, anxiety, shame, dysfunction
• Effective with a variety of clinical populations

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) Program (Neff & Germer, 2013)

• 8-week workshop designed to explicitly teach skills of self-compassion
• Uses meditation, informal practice, group discussion and homework exercises
• Randomized clinical trial of MSC with intervention group vs. wait-list control group
• MSC led to significantly greater gains in self-compassion, mindfulness, compassion, life satisfaction, as well as greater reductions in
depression, anxiety, stress, emotional avoidance
• All well-being gains maintained for one year
• Degree of formal and informal self-compassion practice both related to gains in self-compassion

➢ Days per week spent meditating
➢ Hours per day spent in informal practice
BACKDRAFT

What Is Backdraft?

Backdraft refers to discomfort that may arise when we give ourselves compassion. The experience of backdraft can be confusing for some practitioners but it is a key part of the transformation process. It helps to understand the nature of backdraft and to know how to respond to it.

“Backdraft” is a term that firefighters use to describe how a fire can grow when fresh air is introduced through an open door. A similar effect can occur when we open the door of our hearts with self-compassion. Most of our hearts are hot with pain accumulated over a lifetime. In order to function in our lives, we needed to shut out stressful or painful experiences. However, when the door of our hearts opens and kindness flows in, old hurts are likely to come out. That’s backdraft. The discomfort we feel is not created by self-compassion practice—it’s simply being re-experienced and transformed by the power of compassion.

There is another metaphor for this process – warming up ice-cold hands. When our hands are numb from being out in cold and then they begin to warm up, we may experience pain for a short time. Numbness is also what we may feel toward old pains in our lives until we warm up our awareness with self-compassion.

How Do We Recognize Backdraft?

Backdraft can show up as any type of emotional, mental, or physical uneasiness. For example:

- **Emotionally** – shame, grief, fear, sadness
- **Mentally** – “I’m all alone.” “I’m a failure.” “I’m unworthy.”
- **Physically** – body memories, aches, pains  Often uneasiness appears out of nowhere and we may not understand why it’s happening. A tear can appear while meditating, or a sadness, or a sense of vulnerability. Secondary reactions may also arise when we struggle not to feel backdraft. For example, we might go into our heads
(intellectualize), become agitated, withdraw, space-out, or criticize ourselves and others. All these reactions are quite natural and can also be met with kindness and compassion.

**What Can We Do About Backdraft?**

Below is a summary of approaches to backdraft that you will learn in MSC. However, please remember that you are the foremost expert on your life and what you need. You can begin by asking yourself “What do I need right now? “What do I need to feel safe?” Then, depending on what feels right to you, you may consider any of the following strategies:

**Practice mindfulness to regulate attention:**

- Label the experience as backdraft – “Oh, this is ‘backdraft’”—as you might for a dear friend.
- Name your strongest emotion and validate it for yourself in a compassionate voice (“Ah, that’s grief”).
- Explore where the emotion physically resides in your body, perhaps as tension in your stomach or hollowness in your heart, and offer yourself soothing or supportive touch.
- Redirect your attention to a neutral focus inside your body (e.g., the breath), or a sensation at the boundary of the body (e.g., sensations in the soles of your feet while walking), or a sense object in the outside world (e.g., ambient sounds). The further from your body you go, the easier it will be.

**Anchor awareness in ordinary activities:**

- You may feel the need to anchor your awareness in an everyday activity, such as washing the dishes, going for a walk, showering, cycling. If you happen to find the activity pleasant or rewarding for your senses (smell, taste, touch, sound, vision), allow yourself to savor it. Please see the handout, “Mindfulness in Daily Life,” for further instructions.
- Or you may feel the need to comfort, soothe or support yourself in a
practical, behavioral way, such as by having a cup of tea, a warm bath, 
listening to music, or calling a friend. Please see the handout, “Self-
Compassion in Daily Life,” for additional instructions.
• If you need further assistance, please make use of your personal 
contacts (friends, family, therapists, teachers) to get what you need.
SOOTHING TOUCH

An easy way to support ourselves when we’re feeling badly is to offer ourselves comforting or soothing touch.

**Hand-on-Heart**

- When you notice you’re under stress, take 2-3 deep, satisfying breaths.
- Gently place a hand over your heart, simply feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, placing both hands over your heart.
- Feel the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like. Some people feel uneasy putting a hand over the heart. Feel free to explore where on your body a gentle touch is actually soothing. Some other possibilities are:
  - Cupping your hand over a fist over your heart
  - One hand over your heart and one on your belly
  - Two hands on your belly
  - One hand on your cheek
  - Cradling your face in your hands
  - Gently stroking your arms
  - Crossing your arms and giving yourself a gentle squeeze
  - Gently stroking your chest, back and forth or in small circles
• One hand tenderly holding the other

• Cupping your hands in your lap

**SELF-COMPASSION BREAK**

When you notice that you’re feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.

Now, say to yourself, slowly:

1. *“This is a moment of suffering”* That’s mindfulness. Other options include:
   • *This hurts.*
   • *Ouch!*
   • *This is stressful.*

2. *“Suffering is a part of life”* That’s common humanity. Other options include:
   • *I’m not alone. Others are just like me.*
   • *We all struggle in our lives*
   • *This is how it feels when a person struggles in this way*

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hands. Say to yourself:

3. *“May I be kind to myself,”* or another way of saying this is,
   • *“May I give myself what I need.”*

See if you can find words for what you need in times like this. Options may include:

• *May I accept myself as I am*
• *May I learn to accept myself as I am*
• *May I forgive myself*
• *May I be strong*
• *May I be patient*
• *May I live in love*

If you’re having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person? If your friend would leave with just a few words in mind, what would you like those words to be? What message would you like to deliver, heart to heart? Now see if you can offer the same message to yourself.

**SELF-COMPASSION IN DAILY LIFE**

The goal of the MSC program is to be mindful and self-compassionate in daily life. That means to (1) know when you’re under stress or suffering (*mindfulness*) and (2) to respond with care and kindness (*self-compassion*). The simplest approach is to discover how you already care for yourself, and then remind yourself to do those things when your life becomes difficult.

**PHYSICALLY – soften the body**

How do you care for yourself physically (e.g., exercise, massage, warm bath, cup of tea)?

Can you think of new ways to release the tension and stress that builds up in your body?

**MENTALLY – reduce agitation**

How do you care for your mind, especially when you’re under stress (e.g., meditation, watch a funny movie, read an inspiring book)?

Is there a new strategy you’d like to try to let your thoughts come and go more easily?

**EMOTIONALLY – soothe and comfort yourself**

How do you care for yourself emotionally (pet the dog, journal, cook)?
Is there something new you’d like to try?

**RELATIONALLY – connect with others**

How or when do you relate to others that brings you genuine happiness (e.g., meet with friends, send a birthday card, play a game)?

Is there any way that you’d like to enrich these connections?

**SPIRITUALLY – commit to your values**

What do you do to care for yourself spiritually (pray, walk in the woods, help others)?

If you’ve been neglecting your spiritual side, is there anything you’d like to remember to do?
**COMPASSIONATE LISTENING**

When you are engaged in conversation and would like to listen more attentively and feel more compassion, try practicing Giving and Receiving Compassion. You can continue the conversation and, in the background, feel the movement of your breath in your body. This practice allows us to disentangle from strong emotions and stay connected and emotionally attuned.

- Feel your breathing and, with every *out-breath*, send comfort and soothing to the other person. Wait for each out-breath to return again, sending comfort and soothing each time. (Do this for 5-6 breaths.)

- Now shift your attention to your *in-breath*. Breathe in care and comfort for yourself. Waiting for each in-breath, feel your body inhale, and enjoy the comfort that comes with breathing in. (5-6 breaths.)

- Now feel your body breathe *both* in and out—breathing in for yourself and out for the other. “In for me, out for you.” “One for me, one for you.”

- If you like, you can let a word ride on each in-breath and outbreath, such as “compassion.” “warmth,” “comfort,” “tenderness,” or “love.” Or you can imagine inhaling and exhaling warmth or light. Continue inhaling something good for yourself and exhaling something good for the other.

- If you find that you, or the other person, needs extra compassion, focus again on the in- or out- breath, as needed.

- Gently open your eyes.
**WORKING RELATIONALLY WITH STRONG EMOTIONS**

When strong emotions arise in us, they often trigger reactivity and drive our behavior and harm our relationships, if we let them. We find ourselves acting out of fear, anger, desperation, shame, etc. When we allow our reactivity to run the show, we lose touch with our own vulnerability, the vulnerability of the other person, and our ability to respond from a place of wisdom and compassion. Whenever our suffering exceeds our resources, unskillful behavior is often the result.

Human as it is to be caught in the cycle of reactivity, we often create greater damage to ourselves, others, and our relationships. In order to move from a place of reactivity to responsiveness there are four basic steps.

**First,** we need to disengage from reactivity. In the words of Viktor Frankl, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." So we begin by moving into the space between stimulus and response. We pause and anchor ourselves in the sensation of the breath (or other sensations if the breath is problematic for us). In doing so we create the possibility of a more stable awareness.

**Second,** we turn our attention to our own state of being. What is it that was triggered in us, and what is it that we need? Can we choose to respond to ourselves with wisdom and compassion? In doing so, we awaken the possibility of opening to others.

**Third,** we turn our attention to the vulnerability of the other person. Perhaps considering that we may not know their full story or experience. We begin to tend to them by skillfully listening to what they are saying. Then we broaden our observations to take in the person as a whole. When we open to the experience and vulnerability of the other person, we allow our hearts to melt in response to them.
Fourth, we turn our attention toward choosing our response. We remind ourselves of our values and we choose to respond in a way that has integrity for us. Our response is then rooted in both wisdom and compassion.

One way I like to think about this is the practice I call **STOP & LOVE**.

**STOP & LOVE PRACTICE**

To tend to ourselves we begin with the **STOP** practice:

**S- Stop.** Remember to pause. We begin breaking through reactivity by slowing down, pausing, and making space for something new to happen.

**T- Take a breath.** Actually, take a few breaths. Let everything else rest in the background as you privilege your awareness on the sensation of breathing. Anchoring our awareness in the breath gives us the chance to anchor in this moment and this body.

**O- Observe.** What is happening here in this moment, and this body? Notice the thoughts, emotions and sensations present. No need to change them in any way. Just notice them. Allow the attention to broaden a bit to fully take in what is happening right now. Given your new perspective, perhaps asking yourself, “What do I need right now?”

**P- Proceed to Practice.** Now that you have a better understanding of what is happening, and what you need, see if you can find a way to honor your needs. Perhaps **STOP** was all you needed, or maybe you need to take a walk, have tea, sit in meditation. Maybe there are some words you need to hear. Can you say them to yourself now? The point is to give ourselves what we need to move out of the state of reactivity and into a state of responsiveness. Tending to our true needs, rather than reacting from whatever place was triggered in us is the key.

Now that we are in a state of responsiveness, we turn our attention to the vulnerability of the person in front of us with **LOVE**.
L- **Listen.** This means letting go of ourselves, our vision of how things are or should be, our being right or wrong, good or bad. Let these things rest in the background and really listen to what the other person is saying. What is their perspective, their truth? What is it they want us to know? When we truly open to taking in what the other is saying, we allow ourselves to be touched and moved, to learn things we didn’t know. Listening is both an act of generosity and an act of love.

O- **Observe.** Taking in the other’s experience requires more than just hearing the words they are saying. What is the tone of the words? What does the body look like? Are there tears? A hot red face? A look of fear? As we listen to this person we might notice the state they are in. Do they seem scared, angry, lonely, or sad? If we know them well, we might also know this to be a core pain they carry and we can deepen our understanding of the vulnerable situation they are in. We can remember that, just like us and all beings, this person wishes to be happy and free from suffering. We allow our hearts to be touched by the state of the other. We see more clearly what the other person needs.

V- **Values.** It is helpful to pause here, to remember our own core values. Whenever we take in the vulnerability of another, we have a choice in how we will respond to them. Grounding that choice in our core values allows a wise and compassionate response. If this is a loved one, we might remember that. We might remind ourselves of how important it is to us that they feel safe and loved, free from harm. We can remember how we wish all beings be happy and free from suffering. We might remember our own values or even vows to be compassionate, courageous, kind, or whatever they may be. We pause and ground ourselves in our own values and vows, and then it becomes clearer which actions are in alignment with what is deeply meaningful to us. Grounding in this way allows our response to be guided by wisdom.

E- **Express.** This is the action part of compassion. When we have deepened our understanding of ourselves and the other person, and allowed wisdom and compassion to arise, it often becomes much easier to know how to
respond now. What do we need to say, or not say? Is there a gesture that would be helpful? A smile, eye contact, a pat on the back or a hug? Perhaps the most compassionate thing we can do is to say “no”, or otherwise set a boundary. Or maybe it is to remind them of their importance to us. Often, letting the other know that we see and value them is the most loving thing we can do. Trust your own response and follow through by expressing whatever is needed right now.
RESOURCES FOR LEARNING SELF-COMPASSION

For more information on my courses, including the Mindful Self-Compassion and Cultivating Compassion for Couples courses and workshops, please visit my website at: http://www.wisecompassion.com/.

There is a growing worldwide community who are practicing mindfulness and self-compassion. The Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, a non-profit organization, is dedicated to supporting your practice in a variety of tangible ways.

You are invited to join the global MSC community by visiting the website at the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion. The website includes:

- Audio and video recordings by Kristin Neff, Christopher Germer and other senior MSC teachers
- Resources for supporting continuing practice
- Online offerings for continuing study and ongoing support and community-building
- A Live Online MSC course if you’d like to experience the program from the comfort of your home
- Information about upcoming retreats, workshops and other activities related to self-compassion
- A searchable database of teachers and programs worldwide
- Information on how to become a teacher of MSC
- You can also join the mailing list on the website to receive periodic updates and helpful links to valuable resources.

To stay connected on social media:

- Like the Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/CenterForMSC/
- Follow on Twitter at @centerformsc

For information about learning to teach MSC:

- Please visit the University of California, San Diego, Mindfulness-Based
RESOURCES FOR CULTIVATING COMPASSION FOR COUPLES

The Cultivating Compassion for Couples course is designed to help couples build and strengthen their relationships to themselves and each other, through the skills of mindfulness and compassion training. The course focuses on how to nurture the habits of loving each other, even when it isn’t easy, and deepening our understanding of, and respect for, each other. The course is a stand-alone course which builds on the skills of self-compassion. We (Michelle Becker and Sean Cook) have adapted the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) course in order to focus on how to move more compassion into our primary relationships.

For more information on the Cultivating Compassion for Couples course, please see my website at: www.wisecompassion.com, or the website of my co-founder, Sean Cook, at: http://www.threeriversmindfulness.com/.