

Self-Compassion: Managing Difficult Emotions

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1:45-3:15 PM

*Perhaps everything terrible is,
in its deepest being,
something that needs our love.*

- Rainer Maria Rilke -

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For more on the theory, research, and practice of self-compassion,
and for downloadable, guided meditations, please go to:

www.CenterForMSC.org

www.MindfulSelfCompassion.org

www.Self-Compassion.org

www.CompassionateMind.co.uk

STAGES OF ACCEPTANCE AND PROGRESS

Stages of Acceptance

1. *Exploring* – turning toward discomfort with curiosity
2. *Tolerating* – safely enduring
3. *Allowing* – letting feelings come and go
4. *Befriending* – seeing pain as part of a meaningful life

Stages of Progress

1. *Striving* – wishing to feel better
2. *Disillusionment* – when resistance amplifies discomfort
3. *True Acceptance* – acceptance before change

LOVING-KINDNESS WITH SELF-COMPASSION

- Please find a comfortable position, sitting or lying down. Letting your eyes close, fully or partially. Taking a few deep breaths to settle into your body and into the present moment. You might like to put your hand over your heart, or wherever it is comforting and soothing, as a reminder to bring not only awareness, but *loving* awareness, to your experience and to yourself.
- Locating your breathing where you can feel it most easily. Feeling your breath move through your body, and when your attention wanders, feeling the gentle movement of your breath once again. Letting your body breathe you.
- After a few minutes, starting to notice any *physical sensations* of stress that you may be holding in your body, perhaps in your neck, jaw, belly, or forehead.
- Also noticing if you're holding some *difficult emotions*, such as worry about the future or uneasiness about the past. Understand that every human body bears stress and worry throughout the day.
- See if you can *incline* toward the stress and difficulty in your body as you might incline toward a child or a beloved pet, with curiosity and tenderness.
- Now inclining toward *yourself*, offering yourself goodwill simply *because* of the stress and difficult emotions that you're holding in your body right now, as everyone holds stress in their bodies. Offering words of kindness and compassion to yourself, slowly and affectionately. For example:

May I be safe

May I be peaceful

May I be kind to myself

May I accept myself as I am

(find your own phrases, and repeat slowly and affectionately)

- Whenever you notice that your mind has wandered, returning to the sensations in your body and to the loving-kindness phrases.
- If you are ever swept up in emotion, you can always return to your breathing. Then, when you're comfortable again, returning to the phrases.
- Finally, taking a few breaths and just resting quietly in your own body, knowing that you can return to the phrases anytime you wish.

LABELING EMOTIONS

Find a comfortable, quiet place and sit in a dignified posture, relaxed but upright. Close your eyes or leave them partially open. Take a few deep breaths to relax your body.

- Bringing your awareness to your body by noticing your posture and the world of sensation occurring within the body.
- Placing your hand on your heart and beginning mindful awareness of your breathing. Breathing through your heart. Whenever you wish, you can place your hand back in your lap.
- Now releasing the breath, keeping your attention in the heart region, and asking yourself, "What am I feeling?" Letting your attention be drawn to the *strongest* emotion in your body, even if it's only a whisper of a feeling. Using your body like an antenna.
- Give your strongest feeling a name. If you sat down for this exercise without any strong emotions percolating, you might be feeling "contentment." Perhaps you're just "curious." Eventually you'll probably find another emotion, such as "longing," "sadness," "worry," "urgency," "loneliness," "pride," "joy," "lust," or "envy."
- Repeating the label two or three times, *in a kind, gentle voice*, and then return to your breath.
- If you wish, finding where the emotion is located in your body, and practice "soften, soothe, and allow," and then return to your breath.
- Going back and forth between your breath and your emotions in a relaxed way. Letting your attention be drawn from your breath by an emotion, labeling it, and then returning to your breath. There is no need to find an emotion if there isn't one. Then just be open to the possibility of emotions as you breathe. If you feel overwhelmed by an emotion, stay with your breath until you feel better.
- Gently opening your eyes.

MINDFULNESS OF EMOTION IN THE BODY

- Notice your posture on the chair as if you were seeing yourself from the outside. Feeling your body humming with sensation. Entering into your body and into the world of sensations occurring in this very moment.
- Now bringing attention to your heart region. Placing your hand over your heart to reminding yourself to bring loving attention to your experience.
- Finding your breath in the heart region and beginning to practice mindfulness of breathing. Feeling your chest move as you breathe. When your mind wanders, bringing it back to the sensation of breathing.
- After a few minutes, releasing your attention to your breath and letting yourself recall the difficult emotion. If you wish, remember the *situation* in which you felt the emotion.
- Now expanding your awareness to your body as a whole. While you recall the emotion, scanning your body for where you feel it the most. In your mind's eye, sweeping your body from head to toe, stopping where you can sense a little tension or discomfort.
- Now choose a single location in your body where the feeling expresses itself most strongly, perhaps as a point of muscle tension or an achy feeling, like a headache. In your mind, inclining gently toward that spot as if you were inclining toward a child or a beloved pet. Continuing to breathe naturally, allowing the sensation to be there, just as it is. If you wish, placing your hand over your heart as you continue to breathe. Allowing the gentle, rhythmic motion of the breath to soothe your body.
- At this time, you may wish to add the “soften-soothe-allow” practice.
- Gently opening your eyes.

SOFTEN-SOOTHE-ALLOW

You can practice this exercise whenever you feel stress in daily life. First discover where the stress or a difficult emotion manifests in your body. Then try the following:

- Begin *softening* into that location in your body. Letting the muscles be soft without a requirement that they become soft, like simply applying heat to sore muscles. Softening...softening...softening... Remember that we are not trying to make the sensation go away—you are just holding it in a tender embrace.
- If you wish, letting yourself just soften around the edges, No need to go all the way in.
- If you experience too much discomfort with an emotion, just staying with your breath until you feel better.
- Now, starting to *soothe* yourself because you struggle in this way. Perhaps putting your hand over your heart again and feeling your body breathe. Perhaps bringing kind or encouraging words to mind, such as, “Oh, it’s so hard to feel this. May I be kind to myself.” “May I hold myself in loving awareness.”
- If you wish, directing kindness to an uncomfortable part of your body by placing your hand over that place. Maybe even thinking of your body as if it were the body of a beloved child, and gently soothing...soothing...soothing.
- Finally, *allowing* the discomfort to be there. Letting go of the wish for discomfort to disappear. Allowing the discomfort to come and go as it pleases, like a guest in your own home. Allowing...allowing...allowing
- Softening...soothing...allowing. Softening...soothing...allowing. Repeating these words like a mantra, if you wish, reminding yourself to incline with tenderness toward your suffering.
- As you do this exercise you may find that the emotion moves in your body, or even changes into another emotion. Try staying with your experience, continuing to use the technique of soften-soothe-allow.
- Slowly open your eyes when you’re ready.

SOFTEN-SOOTHE-ALLOW FOR SHAME

In this exercise, you will be encouraged to focus more on embarrassment than shame. However, if embarrassment or shame has a crippling effect on you, please do not try this exercise.

- Please find a very comfortable position, either sitting or lying down, gently close your eyes, and take a few deep, relaxing breaths.
- Place your hand on your heart for a few breaths, reminding yourself that you are in the room, and to bring kindness to yourself.
- Now let yourself remember an event that made you feel a little bit ashamed. For example, you may have over-reacted to someone's comment and said something that was mean or vindictive.
- Let it be an event that is disturbing enough that you can feel it in your body. Also, let it be an event that you would not like anyone to hear about, or remember, because if they did, they would probably think less of you.
- Now, please reflect for a moment and see if you can determine precisely what it is that you're afraid others might discover about you. Can you give it a name? Perhaps, "I'm defective," "I'm unkind," "I'm a fraud."
- Now see if you can locate *the place in your body* where you have the experience of embarrassment or shame. If you can't find a spot, just notice any tension in your body right now and work with that.
- In your mind, incline gently toward that spot.
- Now, *soften* into that location in your body. Letting the muscles be soft without a requirement that they *become* soft, like simply applying heat to sore muscles. Softening...softening...softening... Remember that we are not trying to make the sensation go away—you are just holding it in a tender embrace.
- If you wish, letting yourself just soften around the edges. No need to go all the way in.
- If you experience too much emotional discomfort, just stay with your breath until you feel better.
- Now, starting to *soothe* yourself because you struggle in this way. Perhaps putting your hand over your heart again and feeling your body breathe. Perhaps bringing kind or encouraging words to mind, such as, "Oh, this is distressing. May I be kind to myself." "May I hold myself in loving awareness."

- If you wish, directing kindness to an uncomfortable part of your body by placing your hand over that place. Maybe even thinking of your body as if it were the body of a beloved child, and gently soothing...soothing...soothing.
- Finally, *allowing* the discomfort to be there. Letting go of the wish for discomfort to disappear. Allowing the discomfort to come and go as it pleases, like a guest in your own home. Allowing...allowing...allowing
- Softening...soothing...allowing. Softening...soothing...allowing. Repeating these words like a mantra, if you wish, reminding yourself to incline with tenderness toward your suffering.
- As you do this exercise you may find that the emotion moves in your body, or even changes into another emotion. Try staying with your experience, continuing to use the technique of soften-soothe-allow.
- Let yourself be just as you are, *if only for the next minute*, with all your strengths and weakness. It's part of being a human being. Every single person in the room right now feels some sort of shame or embarrassment— we are connected in our feelings of being inadequate. No one always gets it right; no one is perfect. Can you let yourself be a work in progress, be just as you are?
- Softening...allowing...soothing
- Remembering that our beliefs about ourselves are just that—beliefs, not facts—that slip in and out of our lives. Also remembering that all people have these negative beliefs about themselves, and we are not alone. This is part of the human experience.
- And when you're ready, slowly open your eyes.