

Cwm Taf University Health Board – Psychological Therapies Department



Developing Compassion for Yourself

Stabilisation Pack

Compassion

Compassion means ‘feeling with’ and ‘feeling for’ a person. It is about learning to feel kind and loving towards yourself. This may be hard if you are more used to criticising and blaming yourself. Developing compassion for yourself may feel strange or scary at first, and will need practice. It can be extremely helpful in overcoming mental health problems, but you will need to persevere with it. As with any new skill it will take time, and there will be some setbacks.

One of the main purposes of learning to be more compassionate to yourself is so that you can calm and soothe your brain and body when they are stuck in a ‘threat response’. The section on ‘How trauma affects the mind and body’ described how if you have experienced trauma, your body may remain on alert even after the danger has gone. Ideally, when we are children, we have parents and carers who help to reassure and calm us if we have been traumatised, and in this way we learn to overcome our fears and to regulate our emotions. Sadly, you may not have had this kind of support – but it is not too late to learn to reassure and calm yourself. With practice, you can develop new habits and responses which will help you to recover from the trauma memories.

Understanding Compassion

Compassionate qualities can be remembered as **SAFE**:

Sympathy is wanting to care for or help ourselves, especially if you are feeling low, scared or vulnerable. It means being kind towards ourselves, rather than being hard on ourselves.

Acceptance allows us to recognise ourselves for who we are. It’s about self-awareness, getting to know and like ourselves with our unique differences. This is more helpful than wishing we were a different kind of person with different feelings and characteristics.

Forgiveness recognises that we make mistakes and can learn from them. It allows us to change if we need to, instead of getting stuck in self-criticism.

Empathy is about being in touch with how others feel, and in turn being more able to accept and understand our own feelings.

Developing these compassionate qualities and attitudes can take time.

Think about each of these qualities. Do you know anyone who seems to fit these descriptions? For example, a friend or relative, or perhaps someone you have read about? Can you think of times when you have behaved compassionately towards others? How could you begin to be more like this towards yourself?

One of the ways that people survive trauma, particularly sexual abuse, is by cutting themselves off from the scared child inside. This frightened, lonely inner child may feel like a part of yourself that you blame and dislike. It is important to try and accept this child part, which is desperately in need of understanding and comfort. You can learn to be a compassionate, protective parent to the child part of yourself, and this will help greatly in your healing.

Developing compassion

Using different senses will help you develop compassion towards yourself – such as imagining a white healing light (visual) or imagining warmth (touch). One way of developing these skills is to create your own image of compassion. Some people might find this difficult, and it might take some practice.

BUILDING A COMPASSIONATE IMAGE

You can use this image when you are feeling sad, lonely or self-critical. Examples of images are: an angel, a tree, a rainbow, a beautiful animal of some kind, and so on. These are some questions to help you start:

- What would you like your compassionate image look like?
- What would they sound like?
- How would they smell or feel?
- How would you like your image to relate/talk to you?
- How would you like to be able to relate/talk to your image?

ANCHORING

It will also be helpful to carry something with you as a reminder of your compassionate image e.g. a photograph, a cross, a picture of Buddha, a soft toy. Whenever you practise being compassionate towards yourself you can hold this symbol or look at it. This will gradually help to 'anchor' a new set of responses that you call upon when you are feeling judgemental or critical towards yourself.

DEALING WITH YOUR 'INNER CRITIC' – FORGIVING YOURSELF

Once you have established a symbol or image for compassion, you can call it to mind to prevent you from returning to old self-critical habits by reminding yourself of your new forgiving and accepting self.

Reading and Resources

Developing compassion is hard on your own, which is why the local services run regular Compassion groups. Ask your mental health worker how to access them.

This is an excellent **self-help book** which you might want to work through, perhaps with the support of your mental health worker:

Lee, D (2012). *The Compassionate Mind Approach to Recovering from Trauma using Compassion focused therapy*. London, Robinson.

You may also find these useful:

www.compassionatemind.co.uk This website has a range of resources and materials.

When Things Fall Apart: Heart advice for difficult times by P. Chodron (2003) London, Element.

Building your Self-Confidence using Compassion Focused Therapy by Mary Welford (2012) London: Robinson