

# COMPASSION FATIGUE

This training is designed to help you acquire knowledge to increase effectiveness and decrease burnout.

**Compassion fatigue** is “the cost of caring”. It is the significant emotional and physical fatigue that helping professionals develop during their careers. Empathy, hope and compassion for self and others gradually wears away. It is also secondary traumatic stress plus burnout.

**Secondary traumatic stress** is: 1) the clinician/caregiver learning about an “unexpected or violent death, serious harm or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate”. 2) “Intrusive thoughts of clients, clients imagery, dreams, etc.” 3) Trying to avoid thoughts/feelings and activities, and detachment from others. 4) Sleep problems, irritability, and general anxiety.

The primary symptoms of secondary traumatic stress are disturbances in one’s cognitive frame of reference pertaining to trust, safety, control and intimacy.

**Burnout** is “the chronic conditions of perceived demands outweighing perceived resources”. It’s also “a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment”.

## Compassion Fatigue:

### 1. Zealot Phase.

Committed, involved and reliable. Ready to problem-solve. Willingness to work extra hours. Enthusiastic.

### 2. Irritability Phase.

Start to cut corners. Start to avoid client contact. Begin to mock co-workers and clients. Daydream and/or become distracted when clients are speaking to us.

### 3. Withdrawal Phase.

Feel tired all the time. Enthusiasm turns sour. Don’t want to talk about work. Complaints may be made about our work.

### 4. Zombie Phase.

Hopelessness turns to rage. Others become incompetent or ignorant in our eyes. Lose our patience and sense of humor. Have no time for fun.

### 5. Victimization versus Maturation and Renewal.

Feel overwhelmed and leave the profession or we transform and experience resiliency.

## WHO IS AT RISK?

- 6% to 26% of clinicians who work with traumatized clients.
- 50% of child welfare workers.
- Women.
- Highly empathetic people.
- Those with unresolved trauma histories.
- Those with insufficient training.

## Some strategies to help develop an effective resiliency plan:

**Compassion Satisfaction** is the positive feelings that one feels due to providing skilled services/interventions in his/her work as a trauma professional. Positive relationships with co-workers develop, as does the belief that one's work makes an important contribution to one's clients and the community.

**Why am I doing this?** Feelings of helplessness can decrease if you ask yourself this question and reflect on the fact that you do have choices and control, and you can change our own experience. We also do not have control over many things. Engaging in rational thinking can help treat burnout.

**Our ability to help others is greatest when we are ready, willing, motivated and capable of helping ourselves.**

**Self-supervision.** "To resolve compassion fatigue we must learn to supervise ourselves with care and compassion instead of criticism and coercion. Critical self-supervision leads to increased perceived threats and other-validated (as opposed to self-validated) caregiving." Self-validated caregiving is resilient to judgment by peers and clients (and rational thinking is part of this caregiving). Treat burnout by changing your perception. **Stress** is the perception of a threat (and not anything external, e.g., too many demands at work, having too little money, etc.).

**Compassion Fatigue Resiliency...** Your **autonomic nervous system** can shift to being either **sympathetically or parasympathetically dominant**. The person who is **parasympathetically dominant** views problems as challenges, muscles are relaxed, body is comfortable, any trauma that has been experienced has been resolved, has an internal locus of control (and is no longer a victim of circumstances) and can access his/her learning/decision-making capacity. This person has maximum cognitive functioning. At times when you're sympathetically dominant, you're experiencing stress and anxiety symptoms, chronic muscle tension and you're hypervigilant. You can't access your learning and are not at maximum cognitive functioning. When you perceive a threat (even a mild one, e.g., criticism) you will sometimes respond reactively (and breach your values/integrity). So self-regulate at these times – relax your body! Professional and personal effectiveness requires self-regulation skills.

**When your sympathetic nervous system is dominant...**

**Fight or flight.** If you're truly in danger of losing your life, then this reflex is useful. (When you perceive a threat, your body responds to neutralize (fight) or move away from this threat.) In our daily lives, however, we're rarely confronted with threats this dire. Instead, we perceive some mild threats and our sympathetic nervous system activates and we try to either kill or run away from our (boss, co-worker, etc.). This overactive threat identification system is the cause of all stress. When our sympathetic nervous system is activated (and dominant), our heart rate increases and our muscles become tense. In our brains, our brain stem becomes more active because our perceived need to survive supersedes all other higher order brain functioning (such as language, speech and compassion). This loss of functioning may partially account for why people have trouble thinking logically when stressed (or have trouble being kind or showing compassion) when they perceive a threat. Once we transition to parasympathetic dominance (without regard for crises), then we have become self-regulatory and have an internal locus of control (and are no longer a victim of circumstances).

**Self-care.** See "professional self-care worksheet".... **When identifying self-care activities, ask yourself...** Does this activity allow me to escape my feelings about the work?...Can I create new meaning from this activity?...Could this reconnect me with something larger than myself?

## **What can supervisors do?**

Allow appropriate control over their schedules and encourage them to take breaks.

Provide regular supervision time.

Strike a balance between administrative and clinical supervision.

Provide active listening skills.

Recommend taking time off.

Ask your supervisees, "How are you doing?"

Encourage peer partners and consultation.

Provide trainings on stress management.

Watch for supervisees who meet high risk criteria. Some examples include supervisees that are survivors (if you know this info), those who are consistently exposed to severely traumatized individuals or those with multiple stressors.

\*Adapted from Compassion Fatigue Prevention and Resiliency. J.Eric Gentry, Ph.D., LMHC. (2005) Sarasota, FL: Compassion Unlimited.

\*Adapted from Cultivating Wellness and Resiliency: Understanding and Combating the Impact of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS). Jessica Wozniak, PsyD. (2015).

# Transformation

## From Sympathetic to Parasympathetic



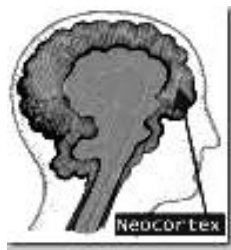
Recent brain imaging research has begun to demonstrate that anxiety is a brain killer-----the more anxiety a person experiences, the less effectively our brains operate. It is becoming increasingly apparent that professional and personal effectiveness requires self--regulation skills. By relaxing the muscles of the pelvic region (i.e., kegels, sphincter, and psoas), we are able to affect profound systemic muscle relaxation. This relaxation facilitates a shift in the autonomous nervous system from the *sympathetic* system (i.e., fight--or--flight reflex utilized during periods of perceived threat) to the *parasympathetic* system (i.e., relaxation and optimal functioning utilized during period of safety). By maintaining this pelvic relaxation, we are able to thwart the autonomous nervous system from shifting to sympathetic dominance each time we perceive even the mildest threats (i.e. criticism).

By practicing the release and relaxation of these muscles, we can gradually shift from sympathetic to parasympathetic dominance. The rewards of this transformation include comfort in our bodies, maximal motor and cognitive functioning, ability to tolerate intimacy, self--regulation, internal vs. external locus of control, ability to remain mission/principle driven, increased tolerance, increased effectiveness, and increased health of our body's systems.

### What happens when my sympathetic nervous system is dominant?

When you perceive a threat, your body responds to either neutralize or move away from this perceived threat. This is true for all species of living things and is known as the "fight or flight reflex." If we are truly in danger of losing our lives, then this reflex is arguable useful. However, we are rarely confronted with threats and circumstances that are this dire in our daily lives. Instead, we perceive some mild threat and our sympathetic nervous system activates and we find ourselves

trying to either kill or run away from our boss, co-worker, or spouse. This over-active and very sensitive threat identification and early warning system is the cause of all stress.



When our sympathetic nervous system is activated and dominant, we are preparing for battle or flight. Our circulation becomes constricted, heart rate increases, and our muscles become tense and ready to act. Inside our brains, the neocortex becomes less functional while the brain stem, basil ganglia, and thalamus become more active. This is because the perceived need to survive has superseded all other brain functioning. As we become more “stressed” and the longer we are in this state of sympathetic dominance, the more likely we are to compromise the functioning of higher order brain systems such as language, speech, motor activity, filtering, and compassion. This loss of functioning may partially account for why people have trouble thinking logically during “stressful” times, or why they have trouble being kind when they perceive threat, or even why they have trouble with peak physical performance (i.e., sports) when they are “nervous.” By simply relaxing and keeping relaxed our pelvic muscles we can reverse this process of sympathetic dominance and return to parasympathetic systems. This return to parasympathetic dominance will allow the individual to regain optimal functioning of speech, language (remember intentional thought is simply talking to ourselves—something for which we need to be able to create language and speech), motor coordination, filtering, and compassion. Once the individual has been able to successfully transition from sympathetic to parasympathetic dominance, without external agents (i.e., drugs) and without regard for the external events (i.e., crises) then the individual has become self-regulatory. A person who becomes skilled in making this transition has developed an internal locus of control and is no longer a victim of circumstances.

## Where are the Pelvic Muscles? How do I find them?

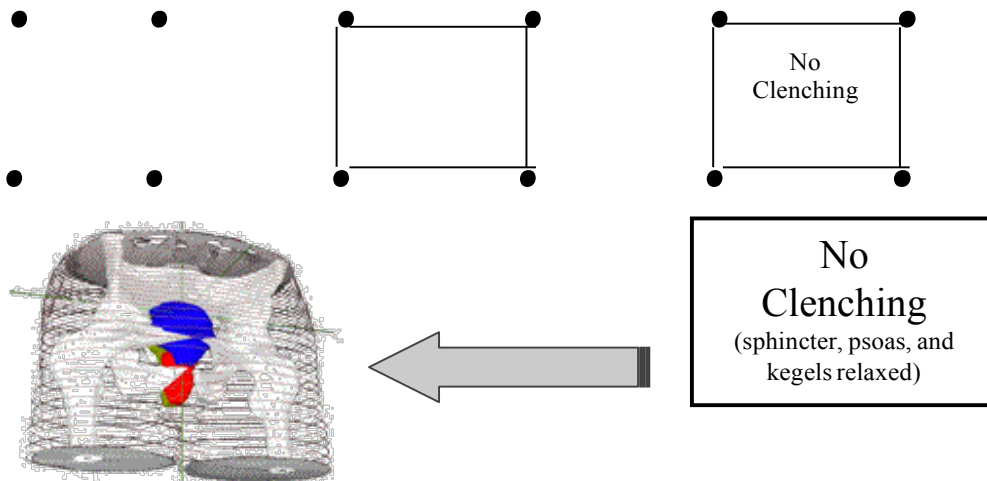
While conducting seminars students often ask me this question. I cannot help but to feel a twinge of sadness when this question is asked. The sadness comes from the awareness that the person asking this question has learned to be unaware of these muscles. People who are not aware of the muscles in their mid--body are not aware for good reason—it has been a coping strategy since childhood. Children who grew up in anxious and dangerous environments learned to keep their bodies tight in anticipation of danger. With no skills for self--regulating, these children often learn to numb and dissociate their awareness away from the pain in their bodies. These children grow into adults that have difficulty being “in” their bodies—difficulty in monitoring and regulating muscle tension and, ultimately, anxiety<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>

Note -- For the person who is unable to locate their pelvic muscles, I suggest that they visit a massage therapist and ask the therapist for assistance in locating and releasing their pelvic muscles. This use of therapeutic touch will help to make the abstract concrete.

### EXERCISE:

1. While sitting, put your hands under your butt.
2. Feel the two pointed bones upon which you are sitting .
3. Now, touch the two bony points on your right and left side just below the waist.
4. You have made a touch memory for four distinct points. Connect those four points to make a square.
5. Now, allow your breath to get to the area in the middle of the square. Also, allow the square to expand.
6. Release and relax all muscles that traverse the area of the square so that there are NO CLENCHED muscles in the square.

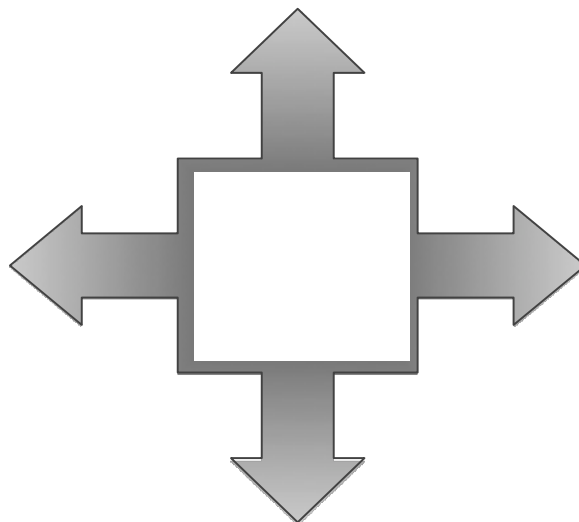


**What now the my Pelvic Muscles are relaxed?**

Simple, keep them that way. If you are able to keep your pelvic muscles released and relaxed for 20 – 30 seconds then you will begin to notice the clear differences in yourself as you transition from sympathetic to parasympathetic dominance. You will first notice comfort in your body. As you release the tension and stress that you yourself have been generating you will become aware that your body is comfortable—no matter what is going on around you. Your thoughts may still be racing and producing warning messages. If this is happening, DO NOTHING; just concentrate on keeping your pelvic muscles relaxed. This will be difficult for many people because since childhood we have taken action when we experience this alarm. However, if we are able to keep our pelvic muscles relaxed then we will be rewarded with a lessening of “stress” and the restoration of optimal functioning in our thinking and actions. With this self--regulation, we will be able to comfortably seek creative solutions to problems and situations that used to leave us baffled, exhausted, and frustrated.

By developing and practicing the skills of self--regulation we will find ourselves able to maintain fidelity to our intention-----our mission. We will find that we no longer need to react to every little crisis as though it is a life--or--death situation. We will become free from our pasts to live for ourselves the lives that we create without having to be perpetually “on guard” for the next danger. We will be able to function at peak effectiveness anytime we choose—a transformation indeed.

**Sympathetic = Reactive = Stress = Diminished Functioning= No Choice**



**Parasympathetic = Intentional = Comfort = Optimal Functioning = Choice**

## Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

### Physical Symptoms

- I have had increased absenteeism "sick days".
- I have been feeling physically ill.
- I have been feeling keyed-up and nervous.
- I am doing less rather than more exercise.
- Normal sleep has been more difficult for me.
- I have lost enjoyment in intimate and sexual activities.

### Psychological Symptoms

- I have noticed myself being more cynical and pessimistic.
- I have noticed that I was trying to avoid feelings by numbing or shutting down.
- I have had work-related nightmares/bad dreams.
- I have lost interest and enjoyment in activities.
- I have difficulty in making decisions or making poor decisions.
- I feel like I have lost some of my self-esteem.

### Emotional Symptoms

- I have anger directed toward my supervisors or co-workers.
- I have been feeling flat, depressed, and hopeless more than I used to.
- I have been more angry and irritable than normal.
- I have moments of dread when thinking about going to work.
- I am having trouble finding hope.
- I am less connected to my spiritual and religious beliefs than I used to be.
- I have felt overwhelmed more than three times.

### Spiritual Symptoms

- I have been avoiding spending time with my friends and family.
- I fear for the safety of myself and my loved ones.
- I have had lack of time for self.
- I find it difficult to trust others.
- I have feelings of despair and hopelessness.

### Professional Symptoms

- I have been unable to get work or something specific to work out of my head.
- I have had unwanted memories pop up in my head of past events from work.
- My productivity at work has been reduced.
- I have felt like quitting my job more than once.
- I find paperwork and menial tasks getting in the way of my enjoyment of work.

Five or more checked could indicate that you are suffering from compassion fatigue symptoms.



# 10 Easy Ways To Practice Mindfulness

By Yatin Khulbe

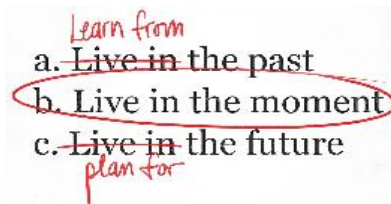
In this fast moving external world, we have lost our inner connection. Every day is a struggle. Everyone is fighting for some position. You don't have time for yourself.

You are always trying too hard to get noticed. But, have you ever noticed your inner world? You are always running after something. But, have you ever taken a simple walk in your inner kingdom? You are always frustrated after your hectic appointments. But, did you schedule any internal meetings?

This is the time to answer all these questions by practicing mindfulness.

## 1. Live in the moment

Enjoy your present without connecting the events with your past and future. You don't have to worry about anything because things unfold in a natural manner. Peel off all the insecurities and just concentrate on your work. Embrace the freshness of this moment to analyze the beauty of NOW. Mindfulness means to be aware of what is happening in the present moment.



In order to live this moment, you have to love your job, your surroundings, your life. Do everything with pure joy. Stop listening to all those people who try to dilute your presence. Start doing all the things you always wanted to do. Start making a wish list of all the things which are close to your heart.

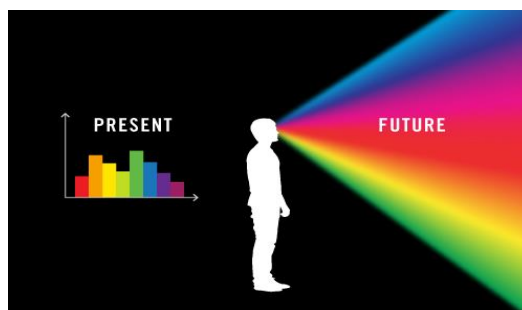
## 2. Accept things as they are

It is a human tendency to wish for better things. Nobody is satisfied with their present conditions. But, a mindful person doesn't judge. By accepting things, we realize their true worth. Things are not good or bad. We create all the mental tags.

You are blessed with unique powers. So, build up your self-confidence and don't try to modify your true personality. Surround yourself with people who accept you and have faith in you. Do not change things because you can't accept them. Change only those things in which you enjoy the whole process of learning new things.

## 3. Use the Power of Visualization

Whenever you are feeling down, close your eyes and visualize your aim of life. In a matter of seconds, you will be transported to your dream land. It is an awesome place where you can do all the things you dream of in a free manner. You must take out some time for this exercise. You will definitely spend some quality time.



#### 4. Practice Mindful Eating

Enjoy your food by chewing it properly. Chewing breaks down your food into small particles for proper digestion. Eat food for nourishing your body only. Recognize your non-hunger triggers to breaking free from food cravings and compulsive overeating. Do not upset your digestive system by eating more. It will have harmful effects on your body.

#### 5. Start your day without any gadgets

What's the first thing you do when you get out of bed each morning? If you check your phone, you are not alone. Many people start their day by checking their phones. Instead of checking office emails or the notifications of your social media profiles, take out some time for meditation. Plan out your whole day in a systematic manner. Don't make any excuses and shift your focus towards this wonderful and productive exercise.



#### 6. Accept your weak points

As nobody is perfect, you must accept your imperfections. If we are not fully aware of our mistakes, we may not only miss what is most significant in our lives but also fail to recognize our true potential. Instead of suppressing your mistakes, analyze them mindfully. A successful person learns from the mistakes only.

Highlight your weak points and start working on them. If you can't solve your problem, ask for some assistance from trustworthy people. You will not become small by asking. Share your problems with your friends and stay away from ego clashes. It doesn't matter if they laugh at you. Today, they are laughing at your foolishness. Tomorrow, you will smile at their innocence.

#### 7. Take small steps

Design your successful road map by taking small steps. As Rome was not built in one day, your dream plan will also take some time. You must give preference to quality over quantity. There is no need to rush into anything. Otherwise, you will spoil the essence of the whole journey.

Take small breaks from your work. Go out for a weekend trip with your friends and family. Make small targets and celebrate all small achievements. Start staying away from all the things that will deviate you from your real path. Don't get carried away by the lavish lifestyle of the people, don't waste time on 'overnight success' stories. In the long run, there is no shortcut to a successful life. Always remember one thing: Slow and steady wins the race.



## 8. Wait Patiently

Waiting at the red light, waiting for someone, waiting in the line for something. All these examples are very common in our personal life. The best way to tackle this problem is to shift your focus. Calm down and concentrate on the things around you. If this doesn't work, focus on your breathing. You just have to observe your breathing pattern.

## 9. Free yourself from all distracting thoughts

Thoughts are the temporary guest only. You are not your thoughts. So, don't get carried away by all your disturbing thoughts. In a state of mindfulness, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance only. You have the power to inflate or deflate their presence. You can't stop this kind of thoughts completely. But, as soon as they enter your mind, you must disconnect them from yourself.

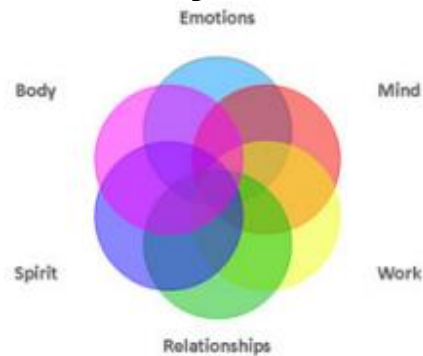
Start writing a journal every day. Without thinking too much, jot down your true feelings. It proves to be a great stress buster. In this way, you will clear all the distracting thoughts.



## 10. End your day on a positive note

Before going to sleep, recollect all the sweet moments of the whole day. Appreciate all the sweet and small moments. Be thankful for everything. Do not waste time in getting irritated by your stressful moments. You will get nothing in return except more stress. Analyze your depressing moments of the day and look out for a positive solution.

# Professional Self-Care Worksheet



*Using the scale below, rate the following areas in terms of frequency:*

- 3 = Often
- 2 = Sometimes
- 1 = Rarely
- 0 = Never

## Physical Self-Care

- Eat regularly (e.g. breakfast, lunch and dinner)
- Eat healthy foods
- Exercise regularly (3 times per week)
- Get regular medical care for prevention
- Get medical care when needed
- Take time off work when sick
- Get massages
- Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, sing, or do some other physical activity you enjoy
- Take time to be sexual
- Get enough sleep
- Wear clothes you like
- Take vacations

## Psychological Self-Care

- Maintain non-anxious presence (relaxed psoas muscle) at work
- Maintain non-anxious presence (relaxed psoas muscle) in personal life
- Maintain self-validation in work
- Maintain self-validation in personal life

- \_\_\_ Make time away from demands
- \_\_\_ Write in a journal
- \_\_\_ Read literature that is unrelated to work
- \_\_\_ Do something at which you are not expert or in charge
- \_\_\_ Decrease stress in your life
- \_\_\_ Let others know different aspects of you
- \_\_\_ Be curious
- \_\_\_ Say “no” to extra responsibilities sometimes

### **Emotional Self-Care**

- \_\_\_ Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
- \_\_\_ Stay in contact with important people in your life
- \_\_\_ Love yourself
- \_\_\_ Play with animals
- \_\_\_ Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places and seek them out
- \_\_\_ Allow yourself to cry
- \_\_\_ Find things that make you laugh
- \_\_\_ Express your outrage in social action, letters and donations, marches, protests
- \_\_\_ Play with children

### **Spiritual Self-Care**

- \_\_\_ Spend time with nature
- \_\_\_ Find a spiritual connection or community
- \_\_\_ Be open to inspiration
- \_\_\_ Cherish your optimism and hope
- \_\_\_ Try at times not to be in charge or the expert
- \_\_\_ Be open to not knowing
- \_\_\_ Have gratitude
- \_\_\_ Meditate
- \_\_\_ Pray
- \_\_\_ Sing
- \_\_\_ Spend time with children

- \_\_\_ Have experiences of awe
- \_\_\_ Listen to music
- \_\_\_ Engage in artistic activity
- \_\_\_ Yoga
- \_\_\_ Be mindful of what is happening in your body and around you
- \_\_\_ Make meanings from difficult periods
- \_\_\_ Seek truth

### **Workplace or Professional Self-Care**

- \_\_\_ Take a break during the workday (e.g. lunch)
- \_\_\_ Take time to connect with co-workers
- \_\_\_ Make quiet time to complete tasks
- \_\_\_ Identify projects or tasks that are exciting and rewarding
- \_\_\_ Set limits with your clients and colleagues
- \_\_\_ Balance your workload so that you are not overwhelmed
- \_\_\_ Arrange your work space so it is comfortable and comforting
- \_\_\_ Get regular supervision or consultation
- \_\_\_ Negotiate for your needs (benefits, pay raise)
- \_\_\_ Have a peer support group

**Self-Care is a  
priority and necessity  
- not a luxury -  
in the work that we do.**

# The 5 Myths of Self-Compassion

## *What Keeps Us from Being Kinder to Ourselves?*

by Kristin Neff

Most people don't have any problem with seeing compassion as a thoroughly commendable quality. It seems to refer to an amalgam of unquestionably good qualities: kindness, mercy, tenderness, benevolence, understanding, empathy, sympathy, and fellow-feeling, along with an impulse to help other living creatures, human or animal, in distress.

But we seem less sure about self-compassion. For many, it carries the whiff of all those other bad "self" terms: self-pity, self-serving, self-indulgent, self-centered, just plain selfish. Even many generations removed from our culture's Puritan origins, we still seem to believe that if we aren't blaming and punishing ourselves for something, we risk moral complacency, runaway egotism, and the sin of false pride.

Consider Rachel, a 39-year-old marketing executive with two kids and a loving husband. A deeply kind person, devoted wife, involved parent, supportive friend, and hard worker, she also finds time to volunteer for two local charities. In short, she appears to be an ideal role model.

But Rachel's in therapy because her levels of stress are so high. She's tired all the time, depressed, unable to sleep. She experiences chronic low-level digestive problems and sometimes—to her horror—snaps at her husband and kids. Through all this, she's incredibly hard on herself, always feeling that whatever she's done isn't good enough. Yet she'd never consider trying to be compassionate to herself. In fact, the very idea of letting up on her self-attack, giving herself some kindness and understanding, strikes her as somehow childish and irresponsible.

And Rachel isn't alone. Many people in our culture have misgivings about the idea of self-compassion, perhaps because they don't really know what it looks like, much less how to practice it. Often the practice of self-compassion is identified with the practice of mindfulness, now as ubiquitous as sushi in the West. But while mindfulness—with its emphasis on being experientially open to and aware of our own suffering without being caught up in it and swept away by aversive reactivity—is necessary for self-compassion, it leaves out an essential ingredient. What distinguishes self-compassion is that it goes beyond accepting our experience as it is and adds something more—embracing the experiencer (i.e., ourselves) with warmth and tenderness when our experience is painful.

Self-compassion also includes an element of wisdom—recognition of our common humanity. This means accepting the fact that, along with everyone else on the planet, we're flawed and imperfect individuals, just as likely as anyone else to be hit by the slings and arrows of outrageous (but perfectly normal) misfortune. This sounds obvious, but it's funny how easily we forget. We fall into the trap of believing that things are "supposed" to go well and that when we make a mistake or some difficulty comes along, something must have gone terribly wrong. (Uh, excuse me. There must be some error. I signed up for the everything-will-go-swimmingly-until-the-day-I-die plan. Can I speak to the management please?) The feeling that certain things "shouldn't" be happening makes us feel both

shamed and isolated. At those times, remembering that we aren't really alone in our suffering—that hardship and struggle are deeply embedded in the human condition—can make a radical difference.

I remember being at the park with my son, Rowan, when he was about four years old, at the peak of his autism. I was sitting on the bench, watching all the happy children playing on the swings, chasing each other, and having fun while Rowan was just sitting on the top of the slide repeatedly banging his hand (something known as stimming). Admittedly, I started to go down the path of self-pity: “Why can't I have a ‘normal’ child like everyone else? Why am I the only one who's having such a hard time?” But years of self-compassion practice gave me enough presence of mind to catch myself, pause, take a deep breath, and become aware of the trap I was falling into.

With a little distance from my negative thoughts and feelings, I looked out at the other mothers and their children and thought to myself, “I'm assuming that these kids are going to grow up with carefree, unproblematic lives, that none of these mothers will have to struggle as they raise their children. But for all I know, some of these kids could grow up to develop serious mental or physical health issues, or just turn out to be not very nice people! There's no child who's perfect, and no parent who doesn't go through some form of hardship or challenge with their children at one time or another.”

And at that moment, my feelings of intense isolation turned into feelings of deep connection with the other mothers at the park, and with all parents everywhere. We love our kids, but damn—it's tough sometimes! As odd as it may sound, by practicing self-compassion as we muddle through, we don't feel so alone.

Fortunately, this isn't just wishful thinking about another self-help approach. In fact, there's now an impressive and growing body of research demonstrating that relating to ourselves in a kind, friendly manner is essential for emotional wellbeing. Not only does it help us avoid the inevitable consequences of harsh self-judgment—depression, anxiety, and stress—it also engenders a happier and more hopeful approach to life. More pointedly, research proves false many of the common myths about self-compassion that keep us trapped in the prison of relentless self-criticism. Here are five of them.

### **1. Self-compassion is a form of self-pity**

One of the biggest myths about self-compassion is that it means feeling sorry for yourself. In fact, as my own experience on the playground exemplifies, self-compassion is an antidote to self-pity and the tendency to whine about our bad luck.

This isn't because self-compassion allows you to tune out the bad stuff; in fact, it makes us more willing to accept, experience, and acknowledge difficult feelings with kindness—which paradoxically helps us process and let go of them more fully. Research shows that self-compassionate people are less likely to get swallowed up by self-pitying thoughts about how bad things are. That's one of the reasons self-compassionate people have better mental health.

A study by Filip Raes at the University of Leuven examined the association of self-compassion with ruminative thinking and mental health among undergraduates at his university. He first assessed how participants were using the self-report Self-Compassion Scale I developed in 2003, which asks respondents to indicate how often they engage in behaviors corresponding to the main elements of self-



compassion. Examples include statements such as “I try to be understanding and patient toward aspects of my personality I don’t like”; “When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through”; and “When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation.”

Raes found that participants with higher levels of self-compassion tended to brood less about their misfortune. Moreover, he found that their reduced tendency to ruminate helped explain why self-compassionate participants reported fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression.

## **2. Self-compassion means weakness**

John had always considered himself a pillar of strength—an ideal husband and provider. So he was devastated when his wife left him for another man. Secretly racked with guilt for not doing more to meet her emotional needs before she sought comfort in someone else’s arms, he didn’t want to admit how hurt he still felt and how hard it was for him to move on with his life.

When his colleague suggested that he try being compassionate to himself about his divorce, his reaction was swift: “Don’t give me that hearts-and-flowers stuff! Self-compassion is for sissies. I had to be hard as nails to get through the divorce with some semblance of self-respect, and I’m not about to let my guard down now.”

What John didn’t know is that instead of being a weakness, researchers are discovering that self-compassion is one of the most powerful sources of coping and resilience available to us. When we go through major life crises, self-compassion appears to make all the difference in our ability to survive and even thrive. John assumed that being a tough guy during his divorce—stuffing down his feelings and not admitting how much pain he was in—is what got him through. But he wasn’t “through”: he was stuck, and self-compassion was the missing piece that would probably have helped him to move on.

David Sbarra and his colleagues at the University of Arizona examined whether self-compassion helps determine how well people adjust to a divorce. The researchers invited more than 100 people recently separated from their spouses to come into the lab and make a four-minute stream-of-consciousness recording of their thoughts and feelings about the separation experience. Four trained judges later coded how self-compassionate these discussions were, using a modified version of the Self-Compassion Scale. They gave low scores to participants who said things like “I don’t know how I managed to do this. It was all my fault. I pushed him away for some reason. I needed him so much, still need him. What did I do? I know I did it all wrong.” High scores were given to people who said things like “Looking back, you have to take the best out of it and move on from there. Just forgive yourself and your ex for everything you both did or didn’t do.”

The researchers found that participants who displayed more self-compassion when talking about their breakup evidenced better psychological adjustment to the divorce at the time, and that this effect persisted nine months later. Results held even when controlling for other possible explanations, such as participants’ initial levels of self-esteem, optimism, depression, or secure attachment. Studies like this one suggest that it’s not just what you face in life, but how you relate to yourself when the going gets tough—as an inner ally or enemy—that determines your ability to cope successfully.

### 3. Self-compassion will make me complacent

Perhaps the biggest block to self-compassion is the belief that it'll undermine our motivation to push ourselves to do better. The idea is that if we don't criticize ourselves for failing to live up to our standards, we'll automatically succumb to slothful defeatism. But let's think for a moment how parents successfully motivate their children. When Rachel's teenage son comes home one day with a failing English grade, she could look disgusted and hiss, "Stupid boy! You'll never amount to anything. I'm ashamed of you!" (Makes you cringe, doesn't it? Yet that's exactly the type of thing Rachel tells herself when she fails to meet her own high expectations.) But most likely, rather than motivating her son, this torrent of shame will just make him lose faith in himself, and eventually he'll stop trying altogether.

Alternatively, Rachel could adopt a compassionate approach by saying, "Oh sweetheart, you must be so upset. Hey, give me a hug. It happens to all of us. But we need to get your English grades up because I know you want to get into a good college. What can I do to help and support you? I believe in you." Notice that there's honest recognition of the failure, sympathy for her son's unhappiness, and encouragement to go beyond or around this momentary bump in the road. This type of caring response helps us maintain our self-confidence and feel emotionally supported. Ironically, even though Rachel wouldn't even dream of taking the former approach with her son, she unquestionably believes that self-flagellation is necessary for her to achieve her goals. She assumes that her anxiety, depression, and stress are a result of her not trying hard enough.

But there's now a good deal of research clearly showing that self-compassion is a far more effective force for personal motivation than self-punishment.

For instance, a series of research experiments by Juliana Breines and Serena Chen of the University of California at Berkeley examined whether helping undergraduate students to be more self-compassionate would motivate them to engage in positive change. In one study, participants were asked to recall a recent action they felt guilty about—such as cheating on an exam, lying to a romantic partner, saying something harmful—that still made them feel bad about themselves when they thought about it. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the self-compassion condition, participants were instructed to write to themselves for three minutes from the perspective of a compassionate and understanding friend. In the second condition, participants were instructed to write about their own positive qualities; and in the third, they wrote about a hobby they enjoyed. These two control conditions helped differentiate self-compassion from positive self-talk and positive mood in general.

The researchers found that participants who were helped to be self-compassionate about their recent transgression reported being more motivated to apologize for the harm done and more committed to not repeating the behavior again than those in the control conditions. Self-compassion, far from being a way to evade personal accountability, actually strengthens it.

If we can acknowledge our failures and misdeeds with kindness—"I really messed up when I got so mad at her, but I was stressed, and I guess all people overreact sometimes"—rather than judgment—"I can't believe I said that; I'm such a horrible, mean person"—it's much safer to see ourselves clearly. When we can see beyond the distorting lens of harsh self-judgment, we get in touch with other parts of

ourselves, the parts that care and want everyone, including ourselves, to be as healthy and happy as possible. This provides the encouragement and support needed to do our best and try again.

#### **4. Self-compassion is narcissistic**

In American culture, high self-esteem requires standing out in a crowd—being special and above average. How do you feel when someone calls your work performance, or parenting skills, or intelligence level average? Ouch! The problem, of course, is that, Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegone notwithstanding, it’s impossible for everyone to be above average at the same time. We may excel in some areas, but there’s always someone more attractive, successful, and intelligent than we are—meaning we feel like failures whenever we compare ourselves to those “better” than us.

The desire to see ourselves as better than average, however, to get and keep that elusive feeling of high self-esteem, can lead to downright nasty behavior. Why do early adolescents begin to bully others? If I can be seen as the cool, tough kid in contrast to the wimpy nerd I just picked on, I get a self-esteem boost. Why are we so prejudiced? If I believe that my ethnic, gender, national, political group is better than yours, I get a self-esteem boost.

Indeed, the emphasis placed on self-esteem in American society has led to a worrying trend: researchers Jean Twenge of San Diego State University and Keith Campbell of the University of Georgia, who’ve tracked the narcissism scores of college students since 1987, find that the narcissism of modern-day students is at the highest level ever recorded. They attribute the rise in narcissism to well-meaning but misguided parents and teachers, who tell kids how special and great they are in an attempt to raise their self-esteem.

But self-compassion is different from self-esteem. Although they’re both strongly linked to psychological wellbeing, self-esteem is a positive evaluation of self-worth, while self-compassion isn’t a judgment or an evaluation at all. Instead, self-compassion is way of relating to the ever-changing landscape of who we are with kindness and acceptance—especially when we fail or feel inadequate. In other words, self-esteem requires feeling better than others, whereas self-compassion requires acknowledging that we share the human condition of imperfection.

Self-esteem is also inherently fragile, bouncing up and down according to our latest success or failure. I remember a time my self-esteem soared and then crashed within about five seconds. I was visiting an equestrian stable with friends, and the old Spanish riding instructor there apparently liked my Mediterranean looks. “You are veerrrry beautiful,” he told me, as I felt myself glow with pleasure. Then he added, “Don’t ever shave your mooostache.” Self-esteem is a fair-weather friend, there for us in good times, deserting us when our luck heads south. But self-compassion is always there for us, a reliable source of support, even when our worldly stock has crashed. It still hurts when our pride is dashed, but we can be kind to ourselves precisely because it hurts. “Wow, that was pretty humiliating, I’m so sorry. It’s okay though, these things happen.”

There’s solid research for the idea that self-compassion helps us in good times and bad. Mark Leary and colleagues at Wake Forest University conducted a study that asked participants to make a video that introduced and described themselves. For instance, “Hi, I’m John, an environmental sciences major. I

love to go fishing and spend time in nature. I want to work for the National Park Service when I graduate,” and so on. They were told that someone would watch their tape and then rate them on a seven-point scale in terms of how warm, friendly, intelligent, likeable, and mature they appeared. (The feedback was bogus, of course, given by a study confederate.) Half the participants received positive ratings and the others neutral ratings. The researchers wanted to examine if participants’ levels of self-compassion (as measured by scores on the Self-Compassion Scale), would predict reactions to the feedback differently from their levels of self-esteem (as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale).

They found that self-compassionate people reported similar emotional reactions in terms of how happy, sad, angry, or tense they were feeling, regardless of whether the feedback was positive or neutral. People with high levels of self-esteem, however, tended to get upset when they received neutral feedback (What, I’m just average?). They were likelier to deny that the feedback was due to their own personality and blamed it on external factors, such as the observer’s being in a bad mood. This suggests that self-compassionate people are better able to remain emotionally stable, regardless of the degree of praise they receive from others. Self-esteem, in contrast, thrives only when the reviews are good, and it may lead to evasive tactics when there’s a possibility of facing unpleasant truths about oneself.

### **5. Self-compassion is selfish**

Many people are suspicious of self-compassion because they conflate it with selfishness. Rachel, for instance, spends a large portion of her days caring for her family and many of her nights and weekends volunteering for the charities she supports. Raised in a family that emphasized the importance of service to others, she assumes that spending time and energy being kind and caring toward herself automatically means she must be neglecting everybody else for her own selfish ends. Indeed, many people are like Rachel in this sense—good, generous, altruistic souls, who are perfectly awful to themselves while thinking this is necessary to their general goodness.

But is compassion really a zero-sum game? Think about the times you’ve been lost in the throes of self-criticism. Are you self-focused or other-focused in the moment? Do you have more or fewer resources to give to others? Most people find that when they’re absorbed in self-judgment, they actually have little bandwidth left over to think about anything other than their inadequate, worthless selves. In fact, beating yourself up can be a paradoxical form of self-centeredness. When we can be kind and nurturing to ourselves, however, many of our emotional needs are met, leaving us in a better position to focus on others.

Unfortunately, the ideal of being modest, self-effacing, and caring for the welfare of others often comes with the corollary that we must treat ourselves badly. This is especially true for women, who, research indicates, tend to have slightly lower levels of self-compassion than men, even while they tend to be more caring, empathetic, and giving toward others. Perhaps this isn’t so surprising, given that women are socialized to be caregivers—selflessly to open their hearts to their husbands, children, friends, and elderly parents—but aren’t taught to care for themselves. While the feminist revolution helped expand the roles available to women, and we now see more female leaders in business and politics than ever before, the idea that women should be selfless caregivers hasn’t really gone away. It’s just that women are now supposed to be successful at their careers in addition to being ultimate nurturers at home.

The irony is that being good to yourself actually helps you be good to others, while being bad to yourself only gets in the way. In fact, I recently conducted a study with my colleague Tasha Beretvas at the University of Texas at Austin that explored whether self-compassionate people were more giving relationship partners. We recruited more than 100 couples who'd been in a romantic relationship for a year or longer. Participants rated their own level of self-compassion using the Self-Compassion Scale. They then described their partner's behavior in the relationship on a series of self-report measures, also indicating how satisfied they were with their partners. We found that self-compassionate individuals were described by their partners as being more caring (e.g., "gentle and kind toward me"), accepting (e.g., "respects my opinions"), and autonomy-supporting (e.g., "gives me as much freedom as I want") than their self-critical counterparts, who were described as being more detached (e.g., "doesn't think about me very much"), aggressive (e.g. "yells, stomps out of the room"), and controlling (e.g., "expects me to do everything his/her way").

Participants also reported being more satisfied and securely attached in their relationship with self-compassionate partners—which makes sense. If I'm withholding toward myself and relying on my partner to meet my emotional needs, I'm going to behave badly when they're not met. But if I can give myself care and support, to meet many of my own needs directly, I'll have more emotional resources available to give to my partner.

The research literature is unclear about whether self-compassion is actually necessary to be compassionate to others, given that many people do a pretty good job of caring for others while shortchanging themselves. However, a growing body of research indicates that self-compassion helps people sustain the act of caring for others. For instance, it appears that counselors and therapists who are self-compassionate are less likely to experience stress and caregiver burnout; they're more satisfied with their careers and feel more energized, happy, and grateful for being able to make a difference in the world.

Because we evolved as social beings, exposure to other people's tales of suffering activates the pain centers of our own brains through a process of empathetic resonance. When we witness the suffering of others on a daily basis, we can experience personal distress to the point of burning out, and caregivers who are especially sensitive and empathetic may be most at risk. At the same time, when we give ourselves compassion, we create a protective buffer, allowing us to understand and feel for the suffering person without being drained by his or her suffering. The people we care for then pick up our compassion through their own process of empathic resonance. In other words, the compassion we cultivate for ourselves directly transmits itself to others.

I know this firsthand through my experience of raising an autistic child. Rowan is now 13, and although he can be a grumpy adolescent, he's a loving kid, who poses few parenting challenges. But it wasn't always so. I often faced situations that I thought were beyond my ability to cope and sometimes had to rely on the power of self-compassion to get me through.

Once, when Rowan was five, I took him to England to see his grandparents. In the middle of the transatlantic flight, he threw an almighty tantrum. I have no idea what set him off, but I suddenly found myself with a flailing, screaming child and a plane full of people looking at us with dagger eyes. What to do? I tried taking him to the bathroom in hopes that the closed door would muffle his screams. But

after I'd shuffled down the aisle, trying to keep him from accidentally hitting passengers along the way, I found the toilet was occupied.

Huddled with Rowan in the tiny space outside the toilet, I felt helpless and hopeless. But then I remembered self-compassion. This is so hard for you, darling, I said to myself. I'm sorry this is happening. I'm here for you. While making sure that Rowan was safe, 90 percent of my attention was on soothing and comforting myself. My mind became flooded with compassion, to the point that it dominated my experience—far more than my screaming child. Furthermore, as I'd already discovered, when I was in a more peaceful and loving frame of mind, Rowan also calmed down. As I soothed myself, he was soothed as well.

When we care tenderly for ourselves in response to suffering, our heart opens. Compassion engages our capacity for love, wisdom, courage, and generosity. It's a mental and emotional state that's boundless and directionless, grounded in the great spiritual traditions of the world but available to every person simply by virtue of our being human. In a surprising twist, the nurturing power of self-compassion is now being illuminated by the matter-of-fact, tough-minded methods of empirical science, and a growing body of research literature is demonstrating conclusively that self-compassion is not only central to mental health, but can be enriched through learning and practice, just like so many other good habits.

Therapists have known for a long time that being kind to ourselves isn't—as is too often believed—a selfish luxury, but the exercise of a gift that makes us happier. Now, finally, science is proving the point.



# **Coping With Family Stress and Anxiety During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**1** Listen to kids' fears and worries. Be emotionally present for them – normalize and validate their feelings.

Example: "You don't look like yourself, but it's ok if you don't want to talk. I'm here if you change your mind." Also, make sure they have age-appropriate outlets to express thoughts/feelings, e.g., a journal.





# Coping With Family Stress and Anxiety During the COVID-19 Pandemic



2

Kids feel safest and do best behaviorally when routines are consistent. Identify what's the same and what's different now.

3

Identify and implement age-appropriate stress-management strategies, e.g., for preschoolers (3 to 6 years old), use visual aids and role-playing to communicate messages clearly.



# **Coping With Family Stress and Anxiety During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

## **4**

Parents can offer options to kids. "Do you want to do your homework or chores first?"



## **5**

Focus on pro-active steps you can control, e.g., follow CDC recommendations re: handwashing, social distancing, etc.



FSA