

Chapter 11

Core Values in Mindful Self-Compassion

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There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.

William Stafford

Compassion may be understood as “a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it” (Gilbert, 1989/2016). *Self-compassion* is simply compassion directed inward. It is a humble enterprise—remembering to include ourselves in the circle of compassion.

The construct of self-compassion was operationally defined and introduced to the scientific community over a decade ago by Kristin Neff (2003). She proposed self-compassion as a type of self-to-self relating that consists of three components: (1) *self-kindness* versus *self-judgment*, (2) *common humanity* versus *isolation*, and (3) *mindfulness* versus *over-identification*. These components combine and mutually interact to create a self-compassionate frame of mind. *Self-kindness* entails being gentle, supportive, and understanding toward oneself. Rather than harshly judging oneself for personal shortcomings, we offer ourselves warmth and unconditional acceptance. *Common humanity* involves recognizing the shared human experience, understanding that all humans fail and make mistakes, and that all people lead imperfect lives. Rather than feeling isolated by one's imperfection—egocentrically feeling as if “I” am the only one who has failed or suffers—the self-compassionate

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person takes a broader and more connected perspective with regard to personal shortcomings and individual difficulties. *Mindfulness* involves being aware of one's present moment experience of suffering with clarity and balance, without being swept away by a storyline about one's negative aspects or life experience—a process that is termed “over-identification.” Taken together, the three components of self-compassion comprise a state of “loving, connected presence.”

The research on self-compassion has increased exponentially over the past decade, with over 1000 journal articles, chapters, and dissertations currently available on the topic (based on a Google Scholar search of entries containing “self-compassion” in the title). Most research on self-compassion has been correlational, using the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003) that measures the three components described above. Increasingly, however, researchers are using additional methods to explore self-compassion such as experimentally inducing a self-compassionate state of mind or evaluating the impact of short- and long-term interventions on psychological, physiological, and behavioral measures of well-being. Research findings tend to converge regardless of the methodology used.

In general, the scientific literature provides clear support for the link between self-compassion and well-being. Self-compassion has been associated with greater levels of happiness, optimism, life satisfaction, body appreciation, and motivation (Albertson et al., 2014; Breines and Chen, 2013; Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007) as well as lower levels of depression, anxiety, stress, rumination, body shame, and fear of failure (Webb, Fiery, & Jafari, 2016; Finlay-Jones, Rees, & Kane, 2015; Neff, Hseih, & Dejithirat, 2005; Odou & Brinker, 2014; Raes, 2010). Self-compassion is also predictive of healthier physiological responses to stress (Arch et al., 2014; Breines et al., 2015; Breines, Thoma et al., 2014).

Ethical Values and the three Components of Self-Compassion

Self-Kindness Versus Self-Judgment Contrary to what might be expected, research suggests that most people are more compassionate toward others than themselves (Neff, 2003). To illustrate this point, one of the first exercises in the MSC program invites participants to imagine a close friend who is suffering and reflect upon how they might respond to their friend, especially noting their words, tone, gestures, or attitudes. Then participants are asked, “How do you respond to *yourself* when you find yourself struggling in some way?” Typically, MSC participants discover that they are markedly less kind and more judgmental toward themselves than others. With this realization, participants begin to explore what they themselves may need in a tough moment, such as attention, validation, warmth, and patience, which launches participants on the path to self-compassion.

Most everyone seems to have an instinct for compassion (Keltner, Marsh, & Smith, 2010). Compassion is also a basic value in all the world's religions that “reflects something essential to the structure of our humanity” (Armstrong, 2010). For example, Confucius wrote, “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you” and Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).

However, ancient definitions of compassion were usually prescriptions for how people should relate to *others*, and they assume that we naturally love ourselves. This is no longer the case, however. We are more often our own worst enemy. In MSC, our instinct to be kind to others (sometimes just a select few) becomes a vehicle for learning self-kindness. We learn to tuck ourselves into the circle of our compassion. In this manner, the training of self-compassion is based on the basic human value of compassion for others.

Common Humanity Versus Isolation Unfortunately, when we struggle, we are more likely than ever to feel separate and alone. This is because our field of perception narrows when we feel under threat and it is hard to see beyond ourselves. We may further isolate ourselves in embarrassment or shame, as if we were solely responsible for our misfortune. However, when we are self-compassionate, we actually feel *more* connected to others in our awareness of shared human suffering and imperfection—we ourselves as a thread in a very large cloth.

Furthermore, we are likely to have a sense that our misfortune is the product of a universe of interacting causes and conditions rather than entirely due to personal error. This less egocentric view is known as the wisdom of interdependence. Insight into interdependence, or common humanity, opens the door to compassion because it engenders a sense of humility and mutuality. In this way, the ethical values of wisdom, compassion, interconnection, and selflessness are contained in the common humanity component of self-compassion.

Mindfulness Versus Over-Identification Mindfulness is commonly defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). It is “knowing what you are experiencing *while* you are experiencing it.” The opposite of mindfulness is losing perspective and becoming overly identified with our experience. Our tendency to ruminate can become particularly troublesome when we are absorbed in negative thoughts and feelings about ourselves. Mindfulness allows us to see our thoughts and feelings as just that—thoughts and feelings—rather than becoming swept up in them and reacting in regrettable ways.

Mindfulness is the foundation of self-compassion insofar as we can only respond self-compassionately when we know we are struggling. Ironically, we may be the last to know it when we suffer. A mindful moment could simply be the recognition that, “*This* is a moment of suffering!” rather than being lost in rumination, such as “I can’t believe she said that,” and “why did I do it?” The space created by mindful awareness opens the possibility of compassion. Mindfulness is also important in self-compassion training as a means for anchoring awareness in the present moment (e.g., the breath, soles of the feet) when we feel emotionally distressed. Finally, mindfulness helps to generate equanimity, or balanced awareness, which ripens into wisdom. Wisdom refers to understanding the complexity of a situation and the ability to see our way through. When we disentangle for our experience with mindfulness, we are more likely to see the larger picture, the options available to us, and to behave accordingly. In short, mindfulness creates the conditions for wise and compassionate action.

Needs and Core Values

The starting point of self-compassion training is the question, “What do I need?” When we know what we truly need, we are more likely to give it to ourselves. However, finding an answer to the question, “What do I need?” can be a challenge. Understanding our core values may help us discover our deepest needs.

Needs are universal and shared by everyone, albeit to different degrees by different individuals. Examples of needs are safety, belonging, health, and happiness. Needs are deeper than wants. Needs tend to come from the neck down—associated with physical and emotional survival—whereas wants arise from the neck up. Wants can be infinite in number, such as wanting a big house, a fancy car, a beautiful partner, and amazing children.

Sigmund Freud (1923) believed that needs are rooted in primal instincts and drives. Carl Jung (1961) expanded Freud’s model of human needs to include the search for meaning, reflected in his theory of individuation. Maslow (1943) put needs into a hierarchy beginning with physical needs such as food and shelter that must be satisfied before graduating to higher needs associated with individuation, connection, and love. Glasser (1998) described humans as having five basic needs: survival, love, belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Recent theorists suggest that our drive for care and connection might subsume all other human needs (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Gilbert & Choden, 2014). Ryan and Deci (2000) consider psychological health and well-being as linked to three basic human needs: autonomy, competence, and psychological relatedness.

Core values are the principles that determine the choices we make in life. Core values are discovered rather than determined by social desirability. They are a thread that runs through our lives. Examples of core values are compassion, generosity, honesty, friendship, loyalty, courage, tranquility, and curiosity. Thomas Merton (1969) wrote:

If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the things I want to live for. (p. 160–161).

There is also a difference between core values and goals. Goals can be achieved whereas core values guide us after achieving our goals. Goals are destinations; core values are directions. Goals are something we do; core values are something we are. A good eulogy reflects a deceased person’s core values, the *axis mundi* of his or her life.

Ruth Baer (2015) highlights Ryan and Deci’s (2000) need for autonomy as a central link between our biological needs and our core values. In her discussion of values, Baer also makes reference to Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) virtues (e.g., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) and their associated character strengths (e.g., creativity, bravery, love, loyalty, humility, and appreciation). Peterson and Seligman consider human virtues to be biologically adaptive and essential for promoting the well-being of individuals and their communities. In that context, Baer suggests that the human need for autonomy is espe-

cially important as a basis for looking into our core values and thereby contribute to human flourishing.

Knowing our core values can help us orient us to our deepest needs. For example, if “friendship” is a core value for a particular individual, it points toward the basic need for love and connection described by Cacioppo et al. (2008). If “honesty” is a core value, it may point to a person’s need for emotional safety, and if “curiosity” is a value, the underlying need may be for growth and freedom.

Both needs and values seem to reflect something essential in human nature. Needs are more commonly associated with physical and emotional survival, such as the need for health and safety, whereas values tend to have an element of choice, such as the choice to focus on friendship or autonomy. *Knowing* our needs and values supports our ability to respond with compassion in challenging times regardless whether we are struggling for survival or searching for happiness.

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) Training

MSC was the first training program created for the general public that was specifically designed to enhance a person’s self-compassion. Mindfulness-based training programs such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1991) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal et al., 2002) also increase self-compassion (Kuyken et al., 2010), but they do so implicitly, as a welcome byproduct. The developers of MSC, Chris Germer and Kristin Neff, wondered, “What would happen if self-compassion skills were *explicitly* taught as the primary focus of the training?”

MSC is loosely modeled on the MBSR program especially by the focus on experiential learning inquiry-based teaching and 8 weekly sessions of two or more hours each. Some key practices in MBSR have been adapted for MSC by highlighting the *quality* of awareness—warmth kindness—in those practices. Most MSC practices are explicitly designed to cultivate compassion for self and others.

MSC can be accurately described as *mindfulness-based self-compassion training*. It is a hybrid mix of mindfulness and compassion with an emphasis on self-compassion. MSC was designed for the general public yet it also blends personal development training and psychotherapy. The focus of MSC is on building the resources of mindfulness and self-compassion. In contrast, therapy tends to focus on healing old wounds. The therapeutic aspect of MSC is typically a byproduct of developing inner strengths. A corrective emotional experience occurs when relational injury is uncovered through awareness and compassion training and participants learn to hold themselves and their pain in a new way—with greater kindness and understanding.

There are currently three other structured time-limited empirically supported *compassion* training programs: Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT; Jazairi et al., 2014), Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT; Pace et al., 2009), and Mindfulness-Based Compassionate Living (MBCL; Bartels-Velthuis et al.,

2016; van den Brink & Koster, 2015). Each of these programs has a different origin and emphasis and may vary in format and target audience but they all share the common goal of cultivating compassion toward self and others. In addition, Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT; Gilbert, 2010) is a model of psychotherapy with a well-articulated theoretical base and an abundance of practical exercises. Compassion-Focused Therapy does not follow the 6- to 8-week group training structure of the other compassion training programs although a structured program for the general public is currently under development with promising early evidence of effectiveness.

The MSC curriculum has been carefully scaffolded so that the content of each session builds upon the previous session:

- Session 1 is a welcome session, introducing the participants to the course and to one another. Session 1 also provides a conceptual introduction to self-compassion with informal practices that can be practiced during the week.
- Session 2 anchors the program in mindfulness. Formal and informal mindfulness practices are taught to participants as well as the rationale for mindfulness in MSC. Participants learn about “backdraft”—when self-compassion activates difficult emotions—and how to manage backdraft with mindfulness practice. Sessions 1 and 2 include more didactic material than subsequent sessions to establish a conceptual foundation for practice.
- Session 3 introduces loving-kindness and the intentional practice of warming up awareness. Loving-kindness is cultivated before compassion because it is less challenging. Participants get a chance to discover their own loving-kindness and compassion phrases for use in meditation. An interpersonal exercise helps develop safety and trust in the group.
- Session 4 broadens loving-kindness meditation into a compassionate conversation with ourselves, especially how to motivate ourselves with kindness rather than self-criticism. By session 4, many participants discover that self-compassion is more challenging than expected so we explore what “progress” means and encourage participants to practice compassion when they stumble or feel like a failure during the course.
- Session 5 focuses on core values and the skill of compassionate listening. These topics and practices are less emotionally challenging than others, and are introduced in the middle of the program to give participants an emotional break while still deepening the practice of self-compassion.
- The retreat comes after Session 5. It is a chance for students to immerse themselves in the practices already learned and apply them to whatever arises in the mind during 4 h of silence. Some new practices that require more activity are also introduced during the retreat—walking, stretching out on the floor, and going outside.
- Session 6 gives students an opportunity to test and refine their skills by applying them to difficult emotions. Students also learn a new informal practice—soften-soothe-allow—that specifically addresses difficult emotions. The emotion of shame is described and demystified in this session because shame is so often

associated with self-criticism and is entangled with sticky emotions such as guilt and anger.

- Session 7 addresses challenging relationships. Relationships are the source of most of our emotional pain. This is the most emotionally activating session in the course, but most students are ready for it after practicing mindfulness and self-compassion for 6–7 weeks. Themes of Session 7 are anger in relationships, caregiver fatigue, and forgiveness. Rather than trying to repair old relationships, students learn to meet and hold their emotional needs, and *themselves*, in a new way.
- Session 8 brings the course to a close with positive psychology and the practices of savoring, gratitude, and self-appreciation—three ways to embrace the good in our lives. To sustain self-compassion practice, we need to recognize and enjoy positive experiences as well. At the end of the course, students are invited to review what they have learned, what they would like to remember, and what they would like to practice after the course has ended.

Neff and Germer (2013) conducted a randomized controlled study of the MSC program in which MSC participants demonstrated significantly greater increases in self-compassion, mindfulness, compassion for others, and life satisfaction, as well as greater decreases in depression, anxiety, stress, and emotional avoidance compared to wait-listed controls. Moreover, all gains in self-compassion were maintained 6 months and 1 year later. A second randomized controlled trial of MSC was conducted by Friis, Johnson, Cutfield, and Consedine (2016) with people suffering from type 1 and type 2 diabetes. MSC participants demonstrated a significantly greater increase in self-compassion and decrease in depression and diabetes distress compared to controls, and a statistically meaningful decrease in HbA1c between baseline and 3-month follow-up. Other empirically supported adaptations of MSC have been developed, such as for MSC for adolescents (Bluth, Gaylord, Campo, Mullarkey, & Hobbs, 2016) or shorter training without meditation (Smeets, Neff, Alberts, & Peters, 2014).

Core Values in the MSC Curriculum

The necessity of self-compassion became evident to the developers of MSC as they struggled with personal difficulties in their lives. For Kristin Neff, it was the stress of parenting a child with autism and for Chris Germer it was intense public speaking anxiety. Both had been practicing mindfulness for many years. Mindfulness is typically associated with spacious awareness of moment-to-moment *experience* whereas compassion emphasizes loving awareness of the *experiencer*. Chris and Kristin realized that when we are caught in intense and disturbing emotions like shame, grief, or despair, we need to hold *ourselves* in loving awareness before we can hold our moment-to-moment experience with mindfulness. Furthermore, although mindfulness is suffused with love and compassion when mindfulness is in full bloom,

those qualities are likely to slip away when we encounter intense emotions. That is when we need to intentionally warm up our awareness. Loving-kindness and compassion cannot be expected to arise spontaneously when we need them the most.

In traditional Buddhist psychology, there are four virtues (*brahmaviharas*) that confer peace and happiness upon the practitioner. These are loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity (Hahn, 2002). They are traditionally taught in sequence and build upon one another. For example, loving-kindness is taught before compassion because it is easier to be kind when we are not caught in the pain of suffering. However, when loving-kindness meets suffering and stays loving, that is compassion. Similarly, our loving-kindness and compassion may be challenged when others are more fortunate than we are, so our love and compassion need to be strong before we can experience “appreciative joy”—delight over the success of others. Finally, equanimity—the ability to experience pain and pleasure, success and failure, or happiness and sorrow with balanced awareness—is an advanced skill that can only arise when we are already established in the other three virtues.

Although the MSC program is not built around the four virtues, they are nonetheless embedded in the curriculum. For example, we give participants a direct experience of loving-kindness in Session 3 before activating emotional distress and showing how to meet it with kindness in Session 4. In Session 7, when discussing empathic distress and caregiver fatigue, we teach phrases that cultivate equanimity. The equanimity phrases help caregivers get perspective and disentangle from the needs of others so they can access self-compassion and compassion for others. Finally, we teach savoring, gratitude, and self-appreciation at the closing session of the program. (Self-appreciation is taught in the context of gratitude for those who helped us develop our personal strengths.) All of these virtues also represent core values of MSC, and are necessary to help participants maintain a positive attitude as they do the work of learning self-compassion. Self-compassion cannot be taught in isolation of these values.

When we begin to give ourselves loving-kindness, we inevitably discover difficult emotions or unlovely parts of ourselves that make it difficult to remain in a loving state of mind. That is when we need self-compassion. Compassion is a positive emotion (Singer & Klimecki, 2014) that transforms the experience of suffering without denying or sugar-coating our difficulties.

As an illustration, consider the case of Karen, a working mom, and her 14-year-old daughter, Samantha. They have a heated argument about Samantha’s homework that makes Samantha storm off and slam her bedroom door. Karen then finds herself sitting in the living room until late at night ruminating about the encounter. The usual thoughts intrude, such as “I’m not a good parent. I work too much and don’t focus on my children. I’ve already messed up my child.” Her despair might also turn to anger: “Samantha is a spoiled brat and deserves my anger.” Karen has a strong impulse to get a glass of wine and binge on her favorite TV series. Instead, Karen takes a Self-Compassion Break (Neff, 2011).

While sitting alone in her darkened living room, Karen began to notice, “OK, this hurts. I feel tension in my neck. There’s a voice in me that says, ‘I’m not a good

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 discomfort that you feel in your body. Then say to yourself, slowly and kindly:

- *“This is a moment of suffering”*

That is mindfulness. Other options include:

- *This hurts.*
- *Ouch!*
- *This is stressful.*

- *“Suffering is a part of life”*

That is 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*

- *“May I be kind to myself”*

That is self-kindness. Other options might be:

- *May I give myself what I need.*
- *May I accept myself as I am*
- *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, heart-to-heart? If your friend were to hold just a few of your words in their mind, what would you like them to be? What message would you like to deliver? Now, can you offer the same message to yourself.

parent.' This is all very painful.” Then Karen reminded herself, “Literally NO ONE ever said parenting was easy, especially with teenagers. I know I'm not alone in my struggles with Samantha.” Finally, Karen put a hand over her heart and breathed in deeply for herself and out for her daughter as an expression of her maternal interest and care. The tone of her inner dialogue slowly began to change and she heard herself saying, “I know I'm not a perfect mom, but I'm a good-enough mom. Sometimes I don't know what to do or say, but I really want my children to be happy and succeed in life. Perhaps next time I can stay calmer and it will go better.” Karen's self-talk corresponds to the three components of self-compassion in the Self-Compassion Break: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness.

Karen's response to her parenting distress illustrates how core values and self-compassion practice naturally overlap. For starters, Karen would not have been disturbed by the interaction if she had not had the core value of being a "good parent." When she recognized that she was feeling miserable, especially in her body, she tenderly reminded herself that she was not alone. Karen also began to reassure herself in the same manner as she might speak with a friend who was raising children of the same age. Finally, naming her core value of being a good parent helped Karen feel better about herself despite the challenging encounter she had with her daughter.

Participants in MSC are encouraged to recognize and hold difficult parts of themselves in a compassionate embrace—all parts are welcome. For example, most of us have a critical part that is struggling to make us improve, albeit in harsh, counterproductive ways. In MSC, we turn toward such difficult parts, explore their motivation, and then make room for a more compassionate voice or part of ourselves to guide us onward. Parts psychology, such as Internal Family Systems (IFS) by Richard Schwartz (1995), is inherently a compassionate theory of personality because it reduces the tendency toward overgeneralized negative attributions and shame ("I'm unworthy" versus "A part of me feels unworthy"). An interesting difference between IFS and MSC is that IFS assumes that our innate self-compassion naturally emerges as parts are relieved of their burdens whereas MSC intentionally strengthens our capacity to meet our parts with compassion.

A unique aspect of MSC is that we actively cultivate compassion for others as a precursor to activating compassion for ourselves. There are seven MSC practices and exercises that develop compassion for others, and research has shown that activating care of others can increase state self-compassion (Brienes & Chen, 2013). One explanation is that compassion for others helps us to experience common humanity, which makes it safer to accept our own suffering and shortcomings. Research has also shown that increases in self-compassion lead to enhanced compassion for others (Neff & Germer, 2013). In other words, there seems to be a reciprocal relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others.

Since MSC can be emotionally challenging, participants are encouraged to relate to the training program itself in a compassionate manner. In other words, participants are invited to ask themselves, "What do I need?" before engaging in an exercise or practice. If they determine that they are emotionally closing (less receptive, perhaps fatigued, or overwhelmed), they are encouraged to skip the exercise or allow their attention to wander during the instructions. If they are emotionally opening (receptive, alert, curious), then they can allow themselves to fully experience what the practice has to offer.

If self-compassion training feels like a struggle or is harmful in any way, we are not learning self-compassion. The goal and the process should be the same. Self-compassion is about subtraction—letting go of the unnecessary stress that we impose on ourselves through self-criticism, self-isolation, and rumination. Emotional safety is a prerequisite for experiencing compassion, so practicing non-harm and cultivating safety in the classroom is intrinsic to self-compassion training.

Safety is also a basic human need, and non-harm is a core value at the heart of most ethical systems.

Core values are directly addressed in Session 5 of the MSC program. This part of the program was inspired by Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011). Core values give meaning to our lives and frame our difficulties. For example, if we value novelty and learning, losing a job may be a blessing; if we want to provide for our families, losing a job would probably be a catastrophe. Furthermore, when we become confused, core values can serve as a compass or GPS to guide us home. In Session 5, participants do an exercise in which they discover their core values and identify inner and outer obstacles to living in accord with their values. Importantly, the exercise helps participants learn how to have self-compassion for that fact that we cannot always live in accord with our core values, and explore how self-compassion help us nourish and sustain our values even when they are difficult to manifest in our lives.

Discovering Our Core Values

- This is a written reflection exercise so please take out a pen and paper.
- Now, place your hand over your heart or elsewhere, feeling the warmth of your touch.

Looking Back

- Imagine that you are near the end of your life, looking back on the years *between now and then*. What gives you deep satisfaction, joy and contentment? What values did you embody that gave your life meaning and satisfaction? In other words, what core values were expressed in your life? Please write them down.

Not Living in Accord with Values?

- Now, please write down any ways you feel you are *not living in accord with your core values*, or ways in which your life feels out of balance with your values—especially personal ones. For example, perhaps you are too busy to spend much quiet time in nature, even though nature is your great love in life.
- If you have several values that feel out of balance, please choose one that is especially important for you to work with for the remainder of this exercise.

External Obstacles?

- Of course, there are often obstacles that prevent us from living in accord with our core values. Some of these may be *external obstacles*, like not having enough money or time, or having other obligations. If there are, please write down any external obstacles.

Internal Obstacles?

- There may also be some *internal obstacles* getting in the way of you living in accord with your core values. For instance, are you afraid of failure, do you doubt your abilities, or is your inner critic getting in the way? Please write down any internal obstacles.

Could Self-Compassion Help?

- Now consider if *self-kindness and self-compassion could help you live in accord with your true values*. For example, by helping you deal with internal obstacles like your inner critic. Or is there a way self-compassion could help you feel safe and confident enough to take new actions, or risk failure, or to let go of things that are not serving you?

Compassion for Insurmountable Obstacles?

- Finally, if there are *insurmountable obstacles* to living in accord with your values, can you give yourself compassion for that hardship? And what might enable you to keep your values alive in your heart in spite of the conditions? And if the insurmountable problem is that you are *imperfect*, as all human beings are, can you forgive yourself for that, too?

Teaching Self-Compassion as Ethics Training

The best way to teach self-compassion is to *be* compassionate. Students learn self-compassion by internalizing how their teachers embody compassion—loving, connected presence. There is no escape in the influence we have on others by our emotions and attitudes. The reason for this is that our brains are hardwired to resonate with the brains of others. If a teacher feels worried or irritated, their students will feel it. When the teacher is in an accepting, peaceful, and receptive frame of mind, that attitude will pervade the classroom. The phenomenon of “transmission” described in some meditation traditions (such as Zen) occurs when a teacher embodies a desirable state of mind that rubs off on the student.

There are a number of teaching prerequisites that select for personal embodiment of mindfulness and self-compassion. For example, all prospective MSC teachers are expected to have meditated for a few years before taking the intensive teacher training and to have participated in a silent meditation retreat. After teacher training, teacher trainees are expected to continue personal meditation practice and to participate in online consultation while teaching their first MSC course. Finally, teachers are asked to agree to MSC ethical guidelines that include embracing diversity, financial integrity, acknowledging the limitations of the program, respecting the integrity of other contemplative training programs and teachers, and engaging in continuing education.

In the teacher training, prospective teachers are taught to “teach from within” regardless whether they are guiding a meditation, leading a class exercise, delivering a mini-lecture, or reading a poem. Teachers are encouraged to present the curriculum in their own voice in a manner that reflects their passion and inspiration.

Class discussions are conducted using the inquiry method. Inquiry is a particular way of engaging in conversation with individual students about their experience of practice, usually immediately after the practice is completed. The purpose of inquiry is to strengthen the resources of mindfulness and self-compassion. Inquiry is a self-to-other dialogue that ideally mirrors the tone and quality of the self-to-self relationship that we are hoping to cultivate.

Inquiry has three R’s: resonance, resources, and respect. The main task of a MSC teacher during inquiry is to emotionally resonate with their students. Resonance is embodied listening. Resonance occurs when students *feel felt* (Siegel, 2010, p. 136). The second task of teachers is to strengthen the resources of mindfulness and self-compassion by validating those qualities when they see them, or by drawing them out through collaborative exploration. The third “R” is respect—honoring the needs, boundaries, and vulnerabilities of our students. Since we know relatively little about our students’ lives, we need to proceed with caution. Respect refers to safety, and protecting a student’s safety is central to the inquiry process.

In summary, MSC is a mindfulness-based program designed primarily to cultivate the resource of self-compassion. Since compassion is an essential value in most ethical and religious systems, MSC is a fundamentally ethical enterprise. Self-compassion is taught in the context of compassion for others, and increases in self-compassion generally lead to increased compassion for others. Self-compassion training can also be emotionally challenging, so it is best taught in the context of other positive human values such as loving-kindness, gratitude, appreciation, wisdom, equanimity, and joy. The central question in self-compassion training is “What do I need?” and understanding of personal core values helps to connect with our basic human needs and respond to them in a compassionate manner. The MSC program is an experiential learning environment designed to give participants a direct experience of self-compassion as well as learn the principles and practices needed to evoke self-compassion in daily life. MSC has a unique pedagogy based on emotional resonance, resource building, and respect for the individuality and emotional safety of each participant. The best way to *teach* self-compassion is to *be* compassionate, and the best way to *learn* self-compassion is to treat the process of learning as the goal itself, tenderly nurturing, and encouraging ourselves every step of the way.

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