



Interrupting Compassion Fatigue: Self-Compassion Exercises

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health professionals are finding themselves carrying the heavy responsibility of guiding others through an incredible and protracted time of loss and uncertainty. Demands have exceeded time for recovery, making the risk for compassion fatigue and burnout

Compassion fatigue can show up as a lack of empathy for clients, physical and emotional exhaustion, feelings of numbness, anxiety, and depression. Compassion fatigue can get in the way of mental health professionals providing care and wreak havoc on their own mental health. Having a regular mindful self-compassion practice can interrupt compassion fatigue.

The following exercises are two which you can use in your mindful self-compassion practice.

Exercise One: Supportive Touch¹

- An easy way to support ourselves when we're struggling is to offer ourselves supportive or comforting touch.
- When you notice you're under stress, take 2-3 deep breaths.
- Gently place a hand over your heart, simply feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, you can place both hands over your heart.
- Feel the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breathe in and as you breathe out, and your lungs expand and contract.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like.
- Some people feel uneasy putting a hand over the heart. Feel free to explore where on your body a supportive touch is soothing. Other possibilities are:
 - Cupping one hand over a fist over the heart
 - One hand on the belly and one over the heart
 - Two hands on the belly
 - One hand on a cheek
 - Cradling one's face in the hands
 - Gently stroking one's arms
 - Crossing one's arms and giving a gentle squeeze
 - Gently stroking one's chest, back and forth or in small circles
 - Cupping the hands in one's lap

¹ Slightly modified from Neff, K. & Germer, C. (2018). *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook*. New York: Guilford Press.



Exercise Two: Self-Compassion Break²

- Please close your eyes, partially or fully.
- Bring to mind a situation in your life that is difficult, that is causing you stress, such as a health problem, a relationship problem, a work problem, or perhaps a friend who is struggling. Please choose a problem in the mild-moderate range, not a big problem. We don't want to overwhelm ourselves as we're first learning the skill of self-compassion.

[This initial step is to allow you to practice. In reality, you'll do this practice when something stressful arises naturally in your life].

- Allow yourself to see, hear, and feel your way into the problem to the extent that you experience some uneasiness 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's mindfulness. Other options include:
 - This hurts.
 - Ouch!
 - This is stressful.
 - ***“Suffering is part of living”***
 - That's common humanity. Other options include:
 - I'm not alone.
 - Others are just like me.
 - We all struggle in our lives
 - This is how it feels when a person struggles in this way

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

- ***“May I be kind to myself”***
- That's self-kindness. Other options might be:
 - May I give myself what I need.
 - May I accept myself as I am.
 - May I protect myself

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? (pause) Now, can you offer the same message to yourself?

Slowly open your eyes.

² Slightly modified from Neff, K. & Germer, C. (2018). The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook. New York: Guilford Press.