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Training Our Minds in Compassion

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This document outlines a basic approach to developing compassion in our lives. Our first task is to explore how our brains work and what we mean by compassion. Compassion training has a long history, especially in Buddhist traditions, but we link it here to new ideas about how our brains work.

Challenge number 1 - Dealing with our complex brains

I think most of us understand that the brain is extremely complex. We know that pain and suffering is linked to emotions and moods. Most of us would rather feel happy than suffer and yet it can be very difficult to steer our emotions and moods in the right direction.

They are not easy to regulate and while it is possible to carry on and hope things improve, this is not ideal. Another way is to try and understand our minds better – to train them so our positive emotions find their way to the surface.

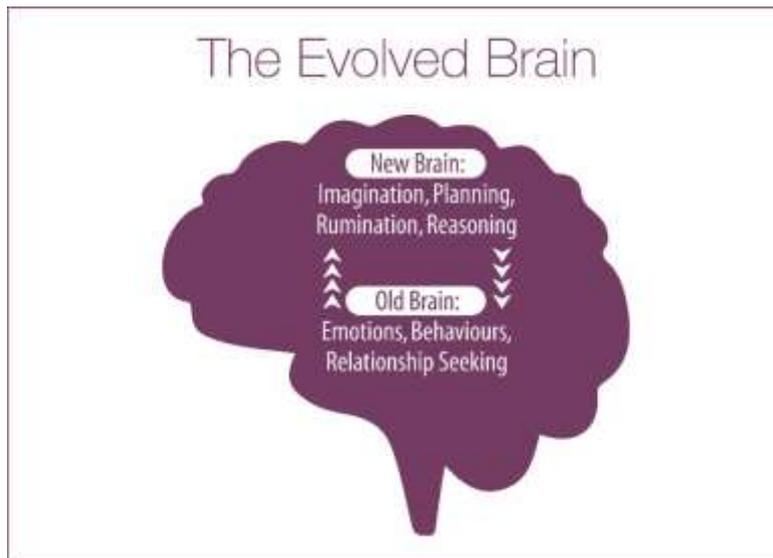
The question is can we train our mind to give us more control over it? The first step on this journey is to understand why our emotions can be difficult and why this is not our fault.

Our brains have evolved over millions of years. In fact, we have two different types of brain in our head (some researchers suggest we have three or four different types). We have an 'old brain' that evolved many millions of years ago and controls animal instincts such as anger, anxiety, fear, disgust, joy or fun. The old brain we have basic defensive behaviours. We can attack if angry, run away if anxious, become submissive or try and hide and cover up – just like many animals.

Many of our emotions such as anger and anxiety as well as our desire to be loved, cared for and respected are built into our brains. However, around 2 million years ago the human brain evolved. We began to imagine and fantasize and to reason and plan in ways other animals cannot do. We have a consciousness and sense of self that other animals do not have.

We can think about the future, regret the past, plan the kind of self we want to be, how we want to feel and the life we want. These are all part of our 'new brain' and made the world what it is today. But this part of the brain can also cause us serious problems and distress.

For example, we can justify conflict and plan revenge, we can go to war, we can become depressed and we can intentionally inflict pain on others. This part of the brain can be hijacked and directed by old brain passions, desires, threats and fears. Our planning, reasoning and imagining can be directed by the emotions and motives of the old brain, pulling us in the direction of fear, anxiety and anger. The diagram below outlines this:



The arrows go in both directions and represent our imagination, ruminations and reasoning which can inflame but also be inflamed by emotions and passions. We will look at this again in our section on 'understanding emotions'.

Our brain has also evolved a capacity for enjoyment, happiness, caring and peace. It will help us if we learn how to train our minds to focus on these. We can learn how find peace and organise our mind in new ways.

This, of course, is the point of the training but first we need to be clear about what we are trying to do and why.

It is clear that much of what goes on has actually been designed for us not by us. This leads us to our second challenge - the challenge of how we find ourselves here and deal with this difficult, and at times, emotionally overwhelming brain.

Challenge number 2 - Just finding ourselves here

We start with the reality that we all just 'find ourselves here'. We did not choose to be born, the genes that made us nor the kinds of emotions and desires that operate within us. We did not choose our basic temperaments or where or when we were born yet these factors will have a profound effect on how we live, what we feel and our core values. Much of what goes on in our minds has been built for us not by us.

Noting the Changes Growing up

We become aware of 'being here', that we exist as a feeling self around two to three years old. As we grow up our brains mature quickly and we become capable of understanding new things. As we enter adolescence we discover hormones are changing our bodies, desires and interests. We choose none of this, it just happens inside of us.

Emotions intensify; we become more easily shamed and sensitive, especially about our bodies; we become more interested in winning the approval and acceptance of our peers and taking an interest in certain types of music, clothes or style.

All of us want to be valued and appreciated and accepted rather than devalued, criticised, taken for granted or rejected. How others treat us and care for us, and how we learn to deal with these unfolding experiences can make a big difference as to how our brain grows and how we learn to cope with difficulties.

As we grow up, we gradually discover that our minds have a range of feelings and passions which sometimes take control. We act according to how our feelings direct us. If we're angry we may say or do hurtful things; if we're anxious we may try to avoid things, thus not learning how to cope with the

things that frighten us. The more we learn about how our brain works and how it was designed, the greater our chances are of learning how to direct or calm these feelings.

Practice is the key. If we inherit a range of difficult emotions and desires, and our brain is shaped by those around us, it may help to learn about it before training it to cope with unpleasant emotions. As we will see, developing compassion is one road to this.

Compassion for self and others helps us deal with many of our more unpleasant feelings such as anxiety and anger, and even despair.

Understanding Motives and Emotions

Our old brain emotions can cause us real difficulties as they are designed to be very powerful and difficult to handle. Our emotions were probably slightly easier to deal with when we lived in close small communities because we felt more secure than we do today.

We have emotions that are focused on threats to ourselves, goals and efforts. These feel unpleasant because they're directing us towards the negative. However, we also experience emotions that are linked to success and achievements which are much more positive. Our emotions evolved to help us see things clearer act upon our knowledge. Generally, if things are going well we feel positive but if they are not then we experience unpleasant emotions.

To help us understand this we can look at the types of the emotions we have and what they are designed to do:

- **Anger** many animals experience anger in various ways which helps them cope with challenges. It helps them put more effort into things, defend themselves or become an alpha. It is an old emotion that, in humans, can be triggered when we are frustrated, when we see an injustice, or if something is unfair.

Anger makes us want to approach the problem, do something about it, 'sort it out'. It can also make us want to retaliate against another person if he or she has upset us or upset someone we love. When anger gets going our bodies feel a certain kind of way; our minds focus on and attend to things that annoy us. We have certain types of thoughts that go with anger.

Spend a moment considering your own thoughts when you become angry, ('how could they ...how dare they ... how bad they are....'). It will also make us want to behave and do things in certain kinds of way, ('I'll show them....'). Maybe we want to shout, swear, or even be aggressive, or withdraw, or try to get our own back.

So, we see that this important emotion can direct our attention, our thoughts and urge us to behave in certain kinds of ways. Consider the things in your life that trigger anger for you; we all have our buttons that can be pushed. Notice how anger pulls on all those aspects in certain ways - like a whirlpool.

- **Anxiety** is another important and basic defensive emotion focused on threats. It gives us a sense of urgency, prompting us to do something such as run away and keep ourselves safe. When anxiety gets going it pulls our thinking to focus on dangers and threats. Like anger, there will probably be certain things in your life that tend to make you anxious.

- **Disgust** makes us want to expel noxious substances or turn away from them. It feels different from anxiety and anger and was originally designed to keep us away from toxic substances. When disgust blends with anger we see contempt.
- **Shame** is usually a blend of other emotions such as anger, anxiety and disgust. It is specifically linked to a sense of ourselves and typically makes us want to run away or close down and be submissive to avoid rejection. Sometimes we express shame with anger and criticism of others.
Our minds do this with very little thought; it is our brain quickly shifting to self-defence.
- **Guilt** makes us wary of exploiting or harming others and prompts us to try and repair the relationship if we do. People often confuse shame with guilt, but with shame the focus of our attention is on ourselves (as a flawed person) and what other people think about us, whereas in guilt it's about our behaviour/actions and how we can repair any hurt we might have caused -we do not see ourselves as bad but we do want to make amends for our behaviours.

In guilt, we reach out with our hearts and feel sorrow; in shame, we withdraw and feel fear, disgust or anger.

- **Emotions about emotions:** Things become even more complex when we get emotional about our emotions. We might become anxious when feeling anger, or angry if we get anxious; ashamed of losing our temper or anger/shame when giving into temptation. It is common to have many different emotions at the same time. The conflicting emotions can be confusing and learning to understand ourselves can be difficult.
- **Different part of our selves:** It is a useful practice to recognize that there are many parts to us that can think, feel and act in different ways. We are multi-faceted beings full of complex emotions.

What about positive emotions? What functions do they have?

- **Excitement.** This energizing emotion directs us towards things that make us happy and that are helpful to us. If something major happens, the system can go into overdrive. You might have racing thoughts; your body may feel accelerated; you'll become very excited and you might have trouble sleeping. Such things don't often happen of course but smaller things do and these small buzzes of pleasure can come from any kind of achievement. The downside however is that if we constantly seek excitement or become dependent on it to feel good, we will want more and more. Our pleasant feelings may evaporate if we are not achieving, succeeding or feeling praised and valued. We find the goal posts for pleasure keep moving and what satisfied us years ago may no longer do so. Without caution it will quickly lead to dissatisfaction.
- **Contentment** gives us a sense of being at peace. It helps us stop wanting all the time and allows us to rest. Interestingly, it's not an emotion that Western societies focus on very much, but as we'll see shortly it's key to well-being.
- **Love and affection** indicate positive relationships between people and tell our brain that we are safe. They help us build bonds which leads to happiness and security. They work best when they are in balance with each other.

Some Key Questions for us to Ponder

Now look at the list of emotions and ask yourself: “How does your body react if each emotion is felt? Where is your attention? What is your train of thought?” Finally, ask yourself whether you are in control or whether your emotions are controlling the way you feel. If we are honest, we often get caught up in an emotion and this controls our thoughts and behaviour.

It can be difficult to stand back and not get caught up in the raw emotions – it’s something we must learn. The interpretations and meanings we put on to our experiences awaken different emotions inside us.

When we think of anxiety and anger, we often have negative reactions. If, however we retrain our mind to think of them as protective emotions, they take on a new role. They can warn us of impending danger, protect us from harm and prevent accidents.

Once we start to truly understand ourselves, anger and anxiety become much easier to deal with. These emotions are part of our being; they have evolved as part of human nature and in many situations, the fight or flight instinct is still so important.

We live in a world which focuses on happiness, but what we’re not reminded is that feeling bad is at times a normal, is indeed important and, in the long term, can be good for you. Learning to balance our emotions is really what counts.

When someone we love dies, we may find ourselves in a deep state of grief, which is naturally very unpleasant. Grief often causes insomnia, extreme sadness and feelings of loss, anger and emptiness. We might have learned to share these feelings or to keep a stiff upper lip, but there is generally a grief state of mind.

We all have the potential for aggressive, vengeful fantasies and attitudes and, of course, we all have the potential for feeling anxious. All these possible states are in our genetic blueprint, and there are genetic and developmental differences among us that affect just how easily or intensely these emotions can be triggered in each one of us.

Emotional Learning and Body Memories

Our brains and bodies can be taught how to respond to things emotionally. We call it conditioning. An experience in your past can control how you behave in the present and in the future. Fears and phobias are often a result of past experiences and our bodies respond with physical signs.

We often take the signs as ‘gut reactions’ and assume that the way we feel is the truth and cannot be changed. We don't examine the evidence but instead have an automatic reaction.

Anxiety and anger can flow through us before we have had a chance to think about what is happening and when we do start to think, there is a chance that we are in conflict with ourselves. This is very common and happens when we show signs of anxiety but we know in our hearts that there is nothing

to worry about. For example, movies can be scary even though we know they are just acting and many people have a phobia of spiders even though they know they're not dangerous.

If we learn to be compassionate and recognize that our feelings are a response to emotions, we will learn to act against them when required. This will help retain a sense of calm.

Repetitive negative behaviour can lead to fear and anxiety. Children who suffer physical or emotional abuse often have repercussions later on in life as certain feelings, such as shame, anger, fear, loneliness, are programmed into the brain and very difficult to avoid.

Our emotions can be overwhelming at times because of the past and there may be areas in our lives where negative behaviour patterns are learned. We weren't born with such patterns; they have been ingrained into our reactions over time.

The Problems with Protection and Safety strategies

As we grow, we develop ways of responding to threats that can be linked to our early experiences. Our bodies remember past experienced and will often try to protect themselves in a situation where we feel threatened. We call these protective or safety behaviours and strategies. They are the way the body has learnt to protect itself but often come with negative consequences such as being unable to learn new ways of coping.

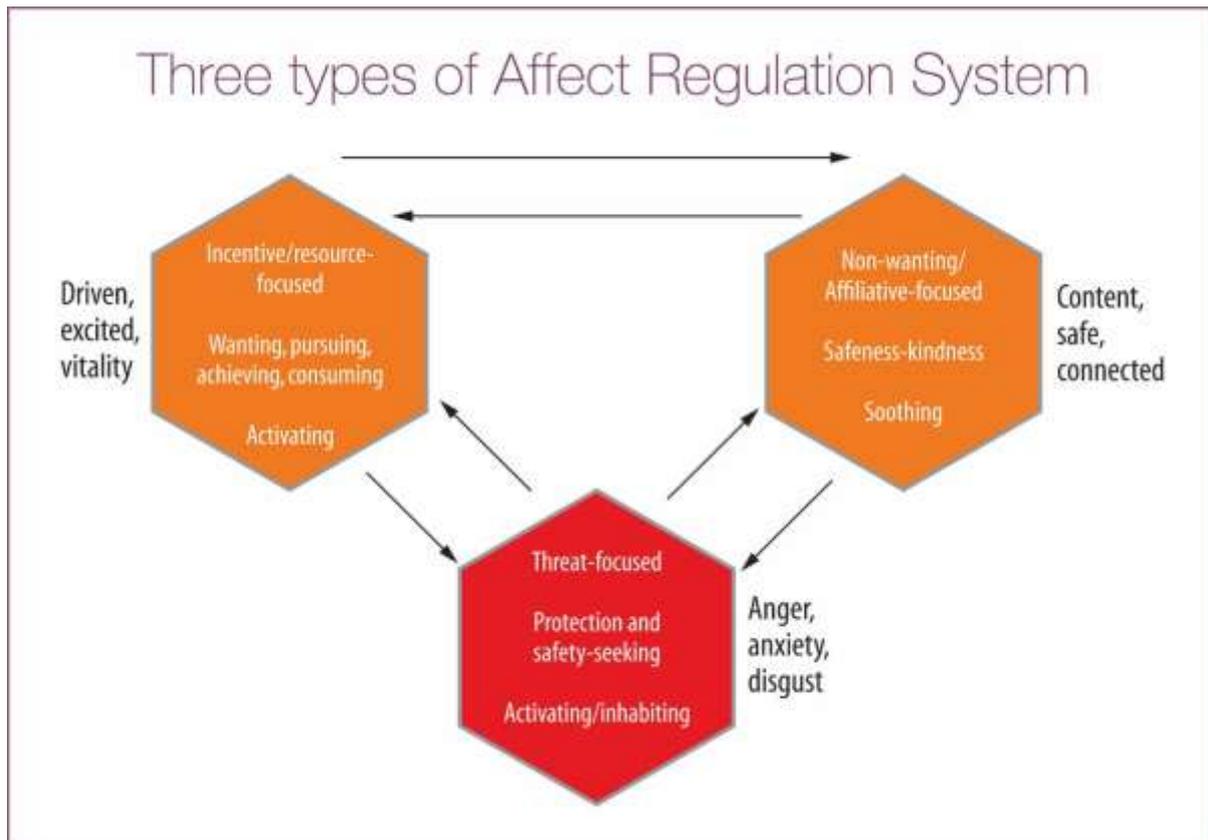
As a result, people can, and will, cut themselves off from the good and so it's important to step back from the gut reaction and consider other ways of responding. Learning to stop and take stock of what's happening is the first step in gaining control.

Learning how to be compassionate rather than fighting with or avoiding our emotions is the next step. Before we look in detail at this however I'm going to show you how compassion can help you deal with complex emotions and enable you to find your sense of self.

The Three Circles Model: The Interaction Between Different Emotions

Our individual experience of emotions and desires come from the patterns they create in our brains. As we will see, when we work on the exercises later, we may be able to take more control over these brain patterns.

Below is a simplified view of the multi-faceted and complex systems in our brains. I have outlined three interacting systems.



1. Threat and Self-protection System

The function of this is to pick up on threats quickly and give us bursts of adrenaline, anxiety, anger or disgust to alert us and urge us to take action against the threat; to self-protect. The result will be fight or flight - or inhibit us so that we freeze, submit or stop what we're doing. It will also be activated if people we love are threatened. Although it is a source of painful emotions, it evolved as a protection system and our brain gives a higher priority to threats than pleasurable things. Physical signs the system is being activated include: a racing heart, nausea, trembling and shallow breath.

Better safe than sorry

The threat system is a reaction and works on a 'better safe than sorry' principle; a principle that saved our ancient ancestors from threats. Some of the threats aren't serious, but some of them are and our when we're in flight mode, our brain doesn't give time to make that distinction.

Our brains are designed to protect us rather than to always be cool and rational. This means that unless we work at being cool and rational our automatic response is to go on the defence and this includes becoming anxious or angry.

2. Incentive and Resource-seeking System (the drive-excitement system)

This system creates positive feelings that guide, motivate and encourage us to seek out things that we need to survive and prosper. We are motivated and pleased by nice things and driven to succeed. However, it also possible for our system to become unbalanced. Drugs, mental illnesses and extreme excitement can all cause a temporary imbalance.

It's a 'go get' system which releases a substance in our brain called dopamine – which is important for our drive. Many things can give a rush of dopamine and from an evolutionary viewpoint such cues indicate things are going well and therefore we need to keep seeking the good things.

3. Soothing and Contentment System

This system enables us to bring a certain soothing, quiescence and peacefulness to the self, which helps to restore our balance. When animals aren't defending themselves against threats and problems, and don't need to achieve or do anything, they are content.

Contentment is essentially being happy with the way things are and feeling safe, not striving or wanting; an inner peacefulness that is quite different to excitement. When people practice meditation and 'slowing down' these are the feelings they report; not wanting or striving, feeling calmer inside and connected to others.

Affection and kindness:

What complicates this system, but is of great importance for our exploration of compassion, is that it is also linked to affection and kindness. For example, when a baby or child is distressed the love of the parent soothes and calms the infant. Affection and kindness from others helps soothe adults too when we're distressed and when we feel soothed we feel safe in our everyday lives.

Substances in our brain called endorphins are important for well-being and are released when we feel kindness. There is also a hormone called oxytocin which links to our feelings of social safeness and affiliation.

When you feel safe and content, what do you tend to and think about? How do you behave?

This system is going to be a focus in our compassion training because it is helpful to our sense of well-being. I will refer to it as a soothing and contentment system. For some people who have psychological difficulties, their threat and self-protection system is very highly developed, making anxiety and anger easy to feel, but their soothing system is less developed. So, compassionate training is like physiotherapy for the mind. We will explore how to use certain exercises to try and help us develop that system.

Mood states

Our moods are related to different patterns of chemicals, feelings and thoughts in our minds. Different emotions come to the fore depending on what our mood is and as we will see, understanding our mood patterns will help with our sense of wellbeing.

The Many Parts of You

As you have read, each of us has many different paths and patterns within ourselves. Which path we choose depends on the situation presented to us and isn't always a choice. There is however a way to

control your emotion and instil a sense of calm. By developing compassion, we can try to focus on creating a calming influence rather than letting the angry/anxious emotions run the show. Your compassionate self is a part of you that we want to try to develop through practice

Key Messages

- Our brains evolved over millions of years and have a range of complex desires, emotions and needs.
- All of us just find ourselves here, existing with our brains that have been designed and built for us, trying as best we can to deal with complex emotions and desires.
- The kind of genes we inherit, and backgrounds we come from, shape our brains, beliefs and values.
- Many of the unpleasant emotions, especially anger and anxiety, are designed for dealing with threats and self-protection.
- Self-protection emotions can link to body and emotional memories and understandable safety strategies such as avoidance, aggressiveness, closing down or submission.
- These self-protection and safety strategies, however, can stop us from learning, growing, developing and balancing our emotions. Becoming more aware of our minds and learning how to refocus on other emotions are far more conducive for our wellbeing.
- We have two types of positive emotion - one is linked to achieving, doing and acquiring things; the other is linked to contentment, feeling safe, and kindness from people and ourselves. Being kind and supportive can help develop these systems.
- Compassionate Mind Training helps us to understand how our threat and self-protection system are working and how to develop a kinder, more soothing approach to our minds.
- In Compassionate Mind Training we shift from blaming and criticizing ourselves to being curious about how our minds work; understanding and taking responsibility to try as best we can to feel more in control and at peace with ourselves.

What is Compassion?

Developing compassion balances our emotions and increases our sense of well-being. But what is compassion?

It can be defined in many ways. For example, the Dalai Lama defines it as 'sensitivity to the suffering of self and others with a deep wish and commitment to relieve the suffering'. I see it as being made up from different aspects of our minds and when defining it, I distinguish between attributes and skills.

The Attributes and Qualities of Compassion

***The first attribute of compassion involves deciding to become compassionate.** This requires motivation and recognizing that the compassionate self is a self that is worth developing.

* **Second, we train our minds to become sensitive to our feelings and thoughts.** We also need to become sensitive to our genuine needs. We need to learn to recognize our feelings as they arise.

* **Third, compassion requires us to be emotionally open to ours and others' suffering.** Sympathy is an emotional reaction to our own and other people's emotions.

* **Fourth, we can only be truly open to feelings if we can tolerate them.** When we are compassionate, we can learn to be open, tolerant, accepting of and kind to our feelings. A key aspect of compassion is learning how to tolerate and come to terms with our feelings so we are more reflective and empathetic.

* **The fifth is empathy.** When we have empathy for others we think about things from their point of view. However, it can be difficult to always show empathy so we need to take time and try to understand why the other person is reacting the way they are.

* **Sixth is the important attribute of not judging.** With compassion, we don't judge our feelings nor try to suppress them, instead, we recognise how we're feeling and take time to find the best way to deal with this.

The Skills of Compassion

There are many skills to be learnt when practicing compassion including redirecting our attention, thinking, reasoning and behaviour.

Let's consider attention. This is often what we focus on, what we look at, what we listen to, what we remember and the reason for doing. When something negative happens, can you redirect your attention to something that is positive? Learning this skill will help to transform your mind-set and ultimately improve your life.

The next skill is reasoning or thinking. Is it possible to train our minds to distance ourselves from our emotions so that we can reason with and think about our reactions in a way that is compassionate and helpful?

When we focus on anxiety, it is difficult to see any positives in a given situation. Therefore, we need to learn how to deliberately choose to refocus our reasoning onto something positive and ask ourselves how we can resolve the problem through more positive ways. Compassionate thinking is a process of honesty and openness; discovering the best solution for you personally for any given situation.

Our third skill is learning how to behave compassionately in ways which will help us with our suffering and move us forward on our life's journey. Compassionate behaviour can mean recognizing when you need a rest or the support of others. When we behave compassionately to others we try to do things that will help them overcome suffering and help them succeed.

Compassionate behaviour also focuses on openness and generosity and the act of giving to self and others. Sometimes it is about acting against anxiety or depression and doing things even though we don't want to. It's not always the easiest path, but it is the only path that will lead to happiness, confidence and acceptance.

Warmth and kindness

Our intentions are what are important – even if we do not feel compassionate, we can still show it. True feelings of compassion will come later with practice. By nurturing feelings of warmth and kindness we will eventually feel these. However, this can be a struggle.

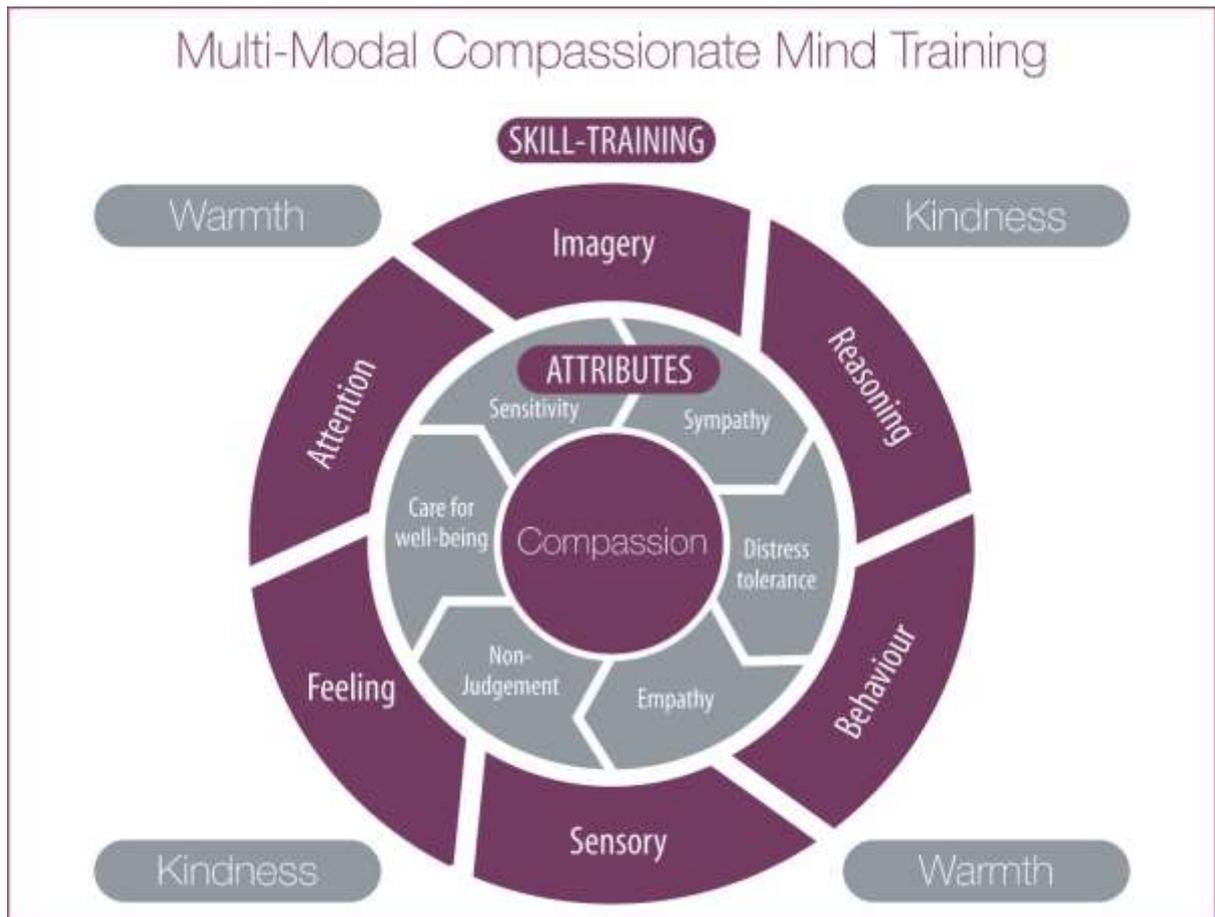
Some may feel kindness for others but not themselves. This is not uncommon and by practicing compassion the feelings will follow over time. The key is learning to focus on what is helpful for you and others, to avoid becoming submissive and to learn how to be more assertive when saying ‘no’.

Compassionate attributes and skills are used to counteract the feelings, thoughts and behaviour that arise when we are angry, anxious, depressed or distressed.

Compassionate Attributes	Compassionate Skills
<p>1. Developing a motivation to be caring towards self and others – reduce suffering and flourish.</p> <p>2. Developing sensitivity to our feelings and needs of self and others (different from vulnerability).</p> <p>3. Developing sympathy and emotionally in tune with our feelings, distresses and need for growth.</p> <p>4. Developing abilities to tolerate rather than avoid difficult feelings, memories or situations (including positive emotions).</p> <p>5. Developing our insight and understanding of how our mind works, why we feel what we feel; how we think – reflective functioning.</p> <p>6. Developing an accepting, non-condemning and non-submissive orientation to ourselves and others.</p>	<p>1. Learning to deliberately focus our attention on things that are helpful and bring a balanced perspective - developing mindful attention.</p> <p>2. Learning to think and reason, using our rational mind to look at evidence and bring a balanced perspective. Writing down and reflecting on our styles of thinking and reasoning.</p> <p>3. Learning to plan and engage in behaviours that act to relieve distress; reduces safety behaviour and moves us (and others) forward to our (their) life goals – to flourish. Compassionate behaviour often needs courage.</p>

The list might, at first glance, appear overwhelming but there is logic behind it and as we go through the exercises you will see how these attributes and skills can be used to help ourselves. There is no need to try and learn it all or remember it all at once.

Below is a circle containing the information from the table above. This diagram will help us to see that each aspect in the outer circle can be used to develop an attribute from the inner circle. If we focus on trying to develop an attribute e.g., to become more sensitive/tolerant to our emotions or those of others, we need to train our attention, thinking and behaviour.



How will Teaching Myself to be Compassionate Help Me?

Researchers across the world are looking into the important physical and mental health benefits of developing compassion and mindfulness.

- For over 2,500 years Buddhists have argued strongly that life has much suffering in it and developing compassion is a way to help us through difficulties.
- Studies of evolution have also shown that many animals, especially humans, are evolved to need and respond to the care of others. We are biologically programmed to be very receptive to care and kindness.
- Studies show that there are areas of our brain that light up when we are kind to ourselves or others, or others are kind to us.

Research is increasingly showing that if we focus on developing compassion and kindness for ourselves, happiness and contentment will follow.

Fear of Compassion?

Research also shows that some people find kindness and compassion difficult. They believe they don't deserve it, that it's weak, it won't help and are fearful of it.

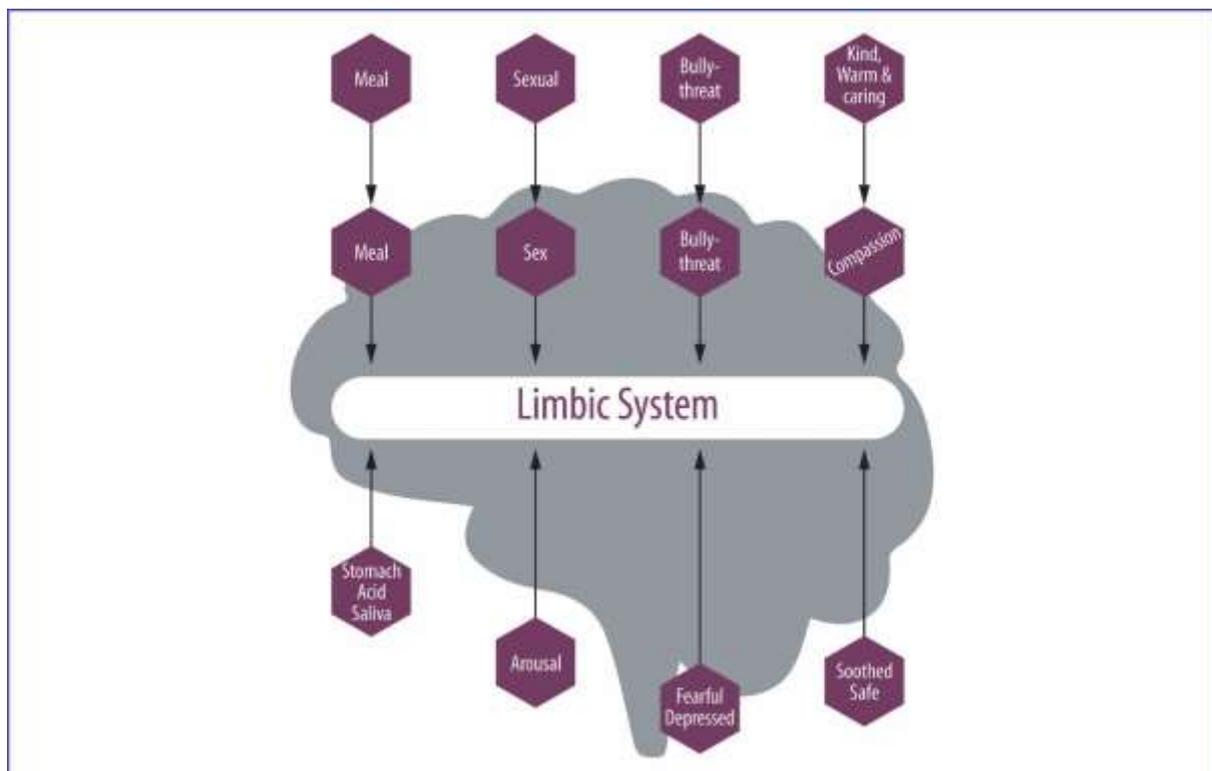
When we start to develop kindness, we often have to deal with sadness and fear. This may seem overwhelming but each step can be worked through at your own pace.

To help you explore how thoughts, images and memories can have powerful effects on the brain, look at diagram 2 below. It shows how external things and our imagination of external things can work in a very similar way.

Have a look at Diagram 2 below and then follow it though with me. While you are looking at it, ask yourself the following: How do our thoughts and images affect our minds and brains?

When you see, hear, smell or touch certain things, an area of your brain is stimulated and will send messages to your body. For example, if you're hungry and sit down to a delicious meal, your body responds accordingly. However, your body will also respond if you imagined you were eating a delicious meal. The key is to see how your body responds in both of these instances. An image that you've created in your mind can simulate physiological systems in your body to respond as if the images were real.

Diagram 2: How our thoughts, images and fantasies affect our brains



Looking at this a different way, imagery and suggestion can also work against you. Imagine you are being bullied at work, constantly belittled and pressurized. The levels of the hormone cortisol will increase, raising your levels of stress. You may feel anxious and upset which could lead to longer-term depression if not dealt with. If you have low self-esteem are overly critical and continually put yourself down, your body will react in the same way. Your own thoughts will lead to a physical reaction by stimulation the threat system within.

Together with my colleagues and researchers at the University of Aston, we have explored what happens in people's brains when they are self-critical. The body activates the threat system and

eventually we will start to feel anxiety, anger, fear and loathing. Learning to spot self-criticism and combatting this before the threat takes hold is a key issue.

The Power of Self-Kindness

We have spent time looking at the three emotion regulation systems and explored a soothing system. We feel soothed when others are kind, understanding, supportive and encouraging. There is a system in our brains that responds so it is important to take a step back and remember that while things may be tough, there is someone who cares about you and understands how hard it is. Take time to think about how this feels.

If we can learn to be kind and supportive, to send ourselves helpful messages when things are hard for us, we will stimulate those parts of our brain that respond to kindness and this will ultimately help us to cope with stress and setbacks. It is essentially about rebalancing your systems.

Our research indicates that when some people first start to be kind to their selves they feel unnatural and often weak. It is important to work through these issues to start training our minds in self-kindness. As previously mentioned, the key is the intention to become more compassionate. Feelings may take a while to follow.

Dr Kristen Neff is a leading researcher in this field and you can read more about her work and findings at www.self-compassion.org. Her work, together with mine, has shown there are important differences between self-compassion and self-esteem. Self-compassion is important when life gets difficult and focuses on similarities and shared humanity. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is linked to our drive-achievement system is why low self-esteem is often linked to feeling inferior. Our brains are a construct of evolution and respond positively to kindness, being compassionate is not self-indulgent, it is a necessity.

This is the same with kindness.

Being compassionate is about understanding how our mind works and using it to our advantage. Focusing on positive aspects of your life is really beneficial to your overall well-being. Try this exercise as a quick demonstration: Spend one minute thinking about the selfless work many charities do across the world. Focus on the fact that millions of people across the world give up their time to help others. Allow yourself to have a compassionate facial expression, maybe a gentle smile. Hold that expression for about one minute. See in your mind people reaching out to others. Note your mood and what happens in this focus. Now contrast this by thinking about the cruel acts people commit against others. Do that for just a second or two and notice what happens to your mood.

That warm feeling you might have experienced disappears the minute your focus shifts to the negative; what you focus your mind on has a major impact on what you feel. If you have trouble with compassion, the chances are that your protection system, through no fault of your own, tends to run the show and it's much easier to create feelings of anxiety than feelings of joy.

Compassionate mind training is about cultivating the mind to focus on the positive.

Section Two Compassion: The Exercises

Preparing for Compassionate Exercises

We have now looked at our basic model as well as the different elements of compassion. It might seem like a lot to take in but don't worry, take one step at a time and practice at your own pace, moving forward only when you have full understanding and confidence in the previous section.

Mindfulness

Developing mindfulness is important when practicing our compassionate exercises. Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment without judgment.; being fully aware of what is going on around you.

Practicing mindfulness is a way of directing our attention and choosing to give it particular focus. Imagine we are a point of consciousness moving through time, only existing in the 'now'. It is like a spotlight that can light up a number of different things, bringing them to our attention one at a time. Sometimes our consciousness will be filled with anger or anxiety about the past, but we can learn to pull back from this and regain our consciousness of living in the now.

Mindfulness is also taking time to appreciate the small things. Spending time to observe and keeping your focus on what is right in front of you. If your mind starts to wander, pull it. Practice mindfulness with everyday activities. For example, eating an apple. Focus on what the apple looks like, how it feels when you touch it, what it smells like, how it tastes and how your body feels when you eat it. There should be no judgement, no distraction - just focus.

Mindfulness is important because much of our lives are spent doing one thing and thinking about something else – we are often distracted, never fully in the moment. As you are learning these new skills, it's important to remember that you are not trying to achieve anything, so there is no right or wrong. Your mind may be all over the place, but the key is to notice when your mind wanders and try to bring it back to the present, to re-focus your attention.

Learning how to breathe

We're now going to use the same idea of mindfully peeling and eating an apple, but this time concentrate on our breathing. The most important thing here is simply to practise breathing without worrying if you're doing it correctly.

Mindful Breathing and Relaxing

There are many aspects to resting mind and body so I'm going to take you through a few key and simple relaxing exercises.

The first one is called 'mindful relaxing' and involves learning how to pay attention in a gentle and kind way. Once you are familiar with this you can do the exercise sitting down, lying down or even standing up and walking. It is, however, preferable to do it sitting down to begin with, so you get the idea of it.

Place both feet flat on the floor about shoulder's width apart and rest your hands on your legs. Gently focus on your breathing - allowing the air to flow into your diaphragm at the bottom of your ribcage.

Feel your diaphragm move as you breathe in and out. Pay attention to your breathing and find a breathing pattern that follows your own comforting rhythm. Spend 30 seconds or so just focusing on your breathing. It may help to focus on the point just inside the nose where the air enters.

In through your nose and out from your mouth. Just focus on that for 30 seconds.

What did you notice? Did your mind wander off? Mindful breathing and relaxing is not about clearing your mind of all thoughts, it is about noticing when your mind wanders and bringing it back to the now. The more you practise this short breathing exercise, the more you will be in control of your mind. You may be surprised at first just how much your mind wanders. But this is to be expected – it takes time to train the mind.

Alternative Nostril Breathing EVERY night 9 times

This exercise is to purely to ground you before sleeping and to ensure you have a restful sleep

How to do Alternate Nostril Breathing (Nadi Shodhan Pranayama)

1. Sit comfortably with your spine erect and shoulders relaxed. Keep a gentle smile on your face.
2. Place your left hand on the left knee, palms open to the sky or in Chin Mudra (thumb and index finger gently touching at the tips).
3. Place the tip of the index finger and middle finger of the right hand in between the eyebrows, the ring finger and little finger on the left nostril, and the thumb on the right nostril. We will use the ring finger and little finger to open or close the left nostril and thumb for the right nostril.
4. Press your thumb down on the right nostril and breathe out gently through the left nostril.
5. Now breathe in from the left nostril and then press the left nostril gently with the ring finger and little finger. Removing the right thumb from the right nostril, breathe out from the right.
6. Breathe in from the right nostril and exhale from the left. You have now completed one round of Nadi Shodhan pranayama. Continue inhaling and exhaling from alternate nostrils.
7. Complete 9 such rounds by alternately breathing through both the nostrils. After every exhalation, remember to breathe in from the same nostril from which you exhaled. Keep your eyes closed throughout and continue taking long, deep, smooth breaths without any force or effort.

Compassion Focused Imagery Work

Few of us can create Polaroid images in our minds without practice, but imagery is important for compassion. A good way to improve the technique is to look at something static (such as a bowl of fruit) then close your eyes and picture that exact bowl in your mind, focusing on the detail.

Some people take to imagery and others don't. If you're one of those who struggle, it's important to remember that your intention to develop more compassion is the key to begin with.

Wandering mind

A wandering mind is very common at the beginning of the learning process. You may not be able to hold the image in your mind for longer than a few second, but this is ok. Try to refocus and picture the image once more. The more you practice, the longer your attention will stay focused for.

Creating a safe place

For the first imagery exercise we are going to try and create a safe place in our minds, one that we feel comfortable in and that is soothing and calming; a place we want to be.

To begin, it's important to be comfortable and either be sitting or lying down. Next, start your breathing exercise mentioned earlier, or if you struggle with that, simply sit still and quiet.

Next, allow your mind to focus and try to create a safe and calm place in your mind. You may choose a tropical beach or a peaceful wood or a cosy cabin in the snow. It doesn't matter where you choose as long as you feel safe and then your body can start to relax. If you struggle to feel at the start, don't worry! The important factor is your intention.

While you are there, try a small smile. Allow yourself to feel how your safe place has pleasure in you being here and explore your own feelings. This will become your safe place; somewhere to retreat to when things get tough.

It is however important to remember to not use imagery for avoidance, but to help us self-soothe. These exercises are for you to see what happens inside when you practice them.

Compassion Colour

When using compassionate imagery, I have found that people occasionally like to start off with imagining a compassionate colour. Usually these colours are pastel rather than dark.

So, engage in your soothing breathing rhythm and when ready, imagine a colour that you associate with compassion or a colour that conveys some sense of warmth and kindness. Spend a few moments on that. Now, imagine your compassionate colour surrounding you and entering through your heart and around your body. As this happens try to focus on this colour as having wisdom, strength and kindness. Try smiling as you imagine. Eventually, you will find that this imagery helps when things get difficult.

Some Key Exercises

Compassion-focused exercises and imagery are designed to try and create feelings of kindness and compassion within you. You are trying to stimulate a particular kind of brain system through your imagery either through memory or imagination. Compassion focused exercises can be orientated in four main ways:

- Developing the inner compassionate self: focus on creating a sense of a compassionate self, just like actors do if they are trying to get into a role.
- Compassion flowing out from you to others: focus on the feelings in our body when we fill our minds with compassionate feelings for other people.

- Compassion flowing into you: focus our minds on opening up to the kindness of others. This is to open the mind and stimulate areas of our brain that are responsive to the kindness of others.
- Compassion to yourself: This is linked to developing feelings, thoughts and experiences that are focused on compassion to yourself. Life is often very difficult and learning how to generate self-compassion can be very helpful during these times, particularly to help us with our emotions.

Before we look at each of these in detail we now need to remember what compassion actually is. It is about learning to care for ourselves, sensitive to our distress, tolerant of our feelings, understanding and non-judgmental. The key skills to develop are directing our attention in compassionate ways, generating and practising compassionate thinking, acting in compassionate ways and generating compassionate feeling.

All of these will be enhanced with practice. We have seen how powerful our thoughts and feelings are in creating physical reactions in our bodies and have established the principle that our choice of focus impacts on our bodily feelings. It is with this basic idea that we can practice states of mind that are conducive to our well-being.

It is so easy for us to be trapped in cycles of negative thinking, imagery and feelings. When we do that, we further stimulate our threat, anger and anxiety systems.

We have to learn how to:

1. Accept our feelings for what they are – rather than try to avoid them to let them consume us.
2. Show compassion and understanding to these feelings.

Compassion focused work is a way of re-directing, taking control over and deliberately enabling oneself to move into emotion and feeling systems that are conducive to well-being. It is not easy, of course, to enable one's mind to do this, but with practice and dedication it can happen.

Developing the Compassionate Self

The different parts of you

We have discussed the different parts of you and the thousands of different potential potentials within ourselves. Developing the compassionate self and the compassionate pattern within ourselves is key when helping us deal with other unpleasant feelings and patterns that arise.

Compassion will soothe our anger and anxiety, but it can also help us develop courage to face them. Harnessing your compassion is harnessing your wisdom and genuine desire to be helpful within yourself.

These might be just small seeds of a possible self but by working with them they can grow. There are many different compassionate-self-developing exercises and the best ones to start with will differ for each person so to some extent we have to experiment. However, a helpful start is to focus on developing the sense of compassion within oneself.

There are many ways in which this can be done and many traditions that use these techniques. For example, certain schools of Buddhism suggest that the seeds of the different types of self exist within 'one self' and it's how we cultivate and nurture them that's important.

The key is to think about what we want to practice; what do we want to become within ourselves? Throughout life we never stop and think about this, we don't think that we can deliberately practice becoming a certain type of person - but we can. It just takes practice. By developing our compassionate selves will help us in many ways such as helping us to become kinder and have a greater sense of well-being; it may also help us to become calmer and more at peace with our feelings.

The first exercise is learning how to practice being a compassionate person and a good way to do this is by using acting techniques. If you were an actor, you would pay attention to key elements of a character. That character might be angry, depressed, anxious, happy, joyful or compassionate. You need to create those experiences within yourself and try to become that character – live it from the inside. To do this you might pay attention to the way this character thinks and sees the world, the tone of voice and what they say and the postures and general attitude. We need to develop a compassionate character and this is the part of us we want to feed, nurture and develop.

Now consider all the qualities you think make up a compassionate person. They should include the following:

- Wisdom derived from personal experiences and an insight into the nature of life's difficulties.
- Strength, as in fortitude and courage.
- Great warmth and kindness.
- Never condemning or being judgemental.

Find somewhere where you can sit quietly and focus on your soothing breathing rhythm. When you feel that your body has slowed down (even slightly) and you are ready to practice, imagine that you are a compassionate person. Focus on each of the qualities above and note what they feel like and any effect this has on your body. Imagine yourself expanding as if you are becoming more powerful, mature and wise. Pay attention to your body and spend a moment just feeling this expansion and warmth. Spend one minute, more if you are able, thinking about your tone of voice and the kind of things you'd say or do and take time to think about the pleasure that comes from being kind. Remember, it doesn't matter if you feel you have these qualities or not, just imagine that you have them.

Notice how each quality can affect your body differently and don't worry if your mind wanders. As before, just try to bring it back. Regular practice will help.

You at your best

Another way to practice your compassion is to spend a moment and remind yourself of a time when you felt compassionate. Sometimes connecting with a memory can be very useful for getting us in touch with the compassionate part of ourselves.

Compassion under the duvet

Ideally you should practice this each day but we are busy and therefore, it's much easier to start by learning what I call 'compassion under the duvet'. This can be completed on any morning without leaving the comfort of your own bed. While changing your expression to be one of compassion, focus

on your desire to be wise and compassionate - remember that you have the capacity for wisdom and strength.

Even two minutes practice every day can have a positive effect and it doesn't matter where you practice – whenever you have a couple of minutes to clear your mind and focus, try this short exercise.

Focusing your Compassionate Self

Once you have been practicing for a while, it is time to focus your compassionate self. If you are feeling at all anxious, sit quietly, engage in your breathing and imagine yourself as a compassionate person. When you start to feel that expanding and growing inside of you, imagine you can see your anxious self in front of you. Look at his or her facial expression, note the feelings rushing through them. Just sit and feel compassion and send compassionate feelings out to that anxious self. Try to surround that anxious self with understanding.

For now, you do not need to do anything other than experience compassion and acceptance and try to visualise what happens the more compassion you give. We are 'treating' the anxiety with compassion. As we learn more and become more confident in our ability, we can try to prevent it from consuming us by refocusing on our breathing and sense of compassionate self. Gently and kindly, you begin to tolerate, accept and feel compassion for your anxious self. As this happens, take notice of the image of your anxious self. It might alter or even begin to fade.

While you might be self-critical about becoming angry or anxious, the important point to recognize is that anger is very rarely a choice; we are designed for it to come to the fore quickly and unexpectedly. By being compassionate, we learn to understand this and once we stop blaming ourselves, we open ourselves to a compassionate resolution - taking responsibility. We commit ourselves to being in better control of our anger in the future. This goes for any emotions that you find difficult

Occasionally our critical self is an echo of someone who was hurtful to us in some way. Working with this aspect of self-criticism may need the help of a therapist rather than on your own. The compassionate action here is realising that this type of self-criticism has come from someone else who may have lacked compassion and the hurtful things they said were not in your best interests.

Compassion Flowing Out

Imagining Compassion for Others

It is also useful to develop feelings of compassion for others. This can be difficult if you are angry or frightened by others, but nevertheless it is a useful exercise. Indeed, researchers have found that generating feelings of compassion can actually change the way our brains work. There are many ways we can experience compassion for others. One way is to start with memories.

Your kindness to others

In this exercise, we are going to imagine kindness and compassion flowing from you to others. Sit quietly where you won't be disturbed and focus on your breathing. Try and recall a time when you felt compassion towards someone. Try not to choose a time when that person was very distressed because then you are likely to focus on that distress. The idea is to focus on the feelings of kindness.

- Imagine yourself helping that person and as a result becoming powerful, calmer, wiser and more mature.
- Pay attention to your body as you remember your feelings of kindness.
- Spend a moment just feeling this expansion and warmth in your body. Note this real genuine desire for this other person to be free of suffering and to flourish.
- Spend one minute, more if you are able, thinking about your tone of voice and the things you said or did.
- Spend one minute, more if you are able, thinking about your pleasure in being kind. Focus on your feelings of kindness in general, the feelings of warmth, the feelings of expansion, the tone of voice, the wisdom in your voice and in your behaviour. When you have finished the exercise, you might want to make some notes about how this felt in your body.

Focusing the compassionate self on others

We can move on to focusing and directing our compassionate self. To practice this important exercise, find a time and place when you can sit quietly without being disturbed. Try to create a sense of being a compassionate person, as best you can. Focus and bring to mind someone you care about (e.g., a partner, friend, parent or child), an animal, or even a plant. When you have them in mind, focus on three basic feelings and thoughts:

- May you be well.
- May you be happy.
- May you be free of suffering.

Keep in mind that it is your behaviour and intentions that are important - and the feelings may follow. Remember that if your mind wanders it is not a problem; just gently bring it back to your task. Try to notice any feelings you have in yourself and your body that emerge from this focusing exercise. Don't worry if nothing much happens at a conscious level – the act of having a go is the important thing.

Expanding these Feelings

When you feel able, and do give yourself time to practice and get the hang of these exercises, you might try filling your mind with compassion for your friends and people you know to be free of suffering and to flourish. You might see them in your mind glowing with happiness. This may only be fleeting and your mind will wander on and off but this does not matter. Another aspect of this practice might be to imagine someone who is suffering in some way. Bring them to mind and imagine what they are struggling with, then really wish for them to find a way to be free from the pain. Imagine them progressing out of the suffering. Focus on your wish for them not to suffer, not to feel alone, tired or cold. Again, the focus here is not to be dragged down by the suffering in the world but rather focus on the feelings of wanting to be a source for helping others. We don't want to feel defeated by the pain in the world, but energized by a desire to help. Imagining the well-being of others can be quite powerful in affecting our feelings.

Being joyful in other people's flourishing

In this exercise, we are going to focus on creating what is called sympathetic joy, which is joyfulness in the flourishing and well-being of others. When we feel warmth for others, (and ourselves), it is not just a reaction to distress but also occurs when good things happen.

Find a place where you won't be distracted and you can sit comfortably and engage in your soothing rhythm breathing. Do that for about one minute until you feel ready to engage in the imagery. Now try and remember a time when you were very pleased for someone's success or happiness. This may be someone close to you in your family. Recall in your mind their facial expressions and try to feel the joy and well-being in them. As you do this, focus on your facial expressions and feel yourself expanding as you remember the joyfulness of that event. Notice how this joyfulness feels in your body. Allow yourself to smile. Spend two or three minutes just sitting with that memory. Then, when ready, let your image fade and maybe write some notes. Over time you may expand this and take joy from hearing about good things.

Compassion Flowing in to You

Remembering others being kind to you

These may be exercises that you would prefer to do first, before developing compassionate focusing for others. In my experience though, some people find self-compassion more difficult than developing compassion for others.

This may bring up some issues for you linked to resistance or fears of compassion and I will address those later. For the moment let's just go over the. For all of these exercises try to find somewhere where you can sit comfortably and not be disturbed. Engage in your soothing rhythm breathing for a minute or so or until you can feel your body slowing down. As this happens, prepare for your compassionate imagery by allowing your body posture to become compassionate. Feel it slightly expanding around you.

Create your compassionate facial expression. This might involve a slight smile or relaxed posture, but it is a gentle facial expression and one that you're happy with. When you feel ready, bring to mind a memory of a time when someone was kind to you. Spend one minute exploring the facial expressions of the person who was kind to you. Focus on important sensory qualities of your memory in the following way:

- The kind of things this person said and the tone of their voice. Spend one minute on that.
- The emotion in the person and what they really felt for you at this moment. Focus on that for one minute.
- The whole experience - whether they touched you or helped you in other ways, and notice your sense of gratitude and pleasure at being helped. Allow that experience of gratitude and joy in being helped to grow. Remember to keep your facial expression as compassionate as you can. Spend a few minutes with that memory. When you are ready, gently let the memory fade, come out of your exercise, make some notes on how you felt in your mind and body.

You may note that bringing these memories to mind may create feelings inside of you even if they are just glimmers. To demonstrate this, consider what would happen if you focused on how other people

have been unkind to you or you have shown anger for them? You would clearly create very different feelings inside yourself. The funny thing is that because we don't really pay attention to what goes on in our minds we can allow ourselves to exist in places where we only spend time on how other people have been unkind or threatening to us.

When we do that we block out nicer memories. This causes us to spend time stimulating our threat system. The question is: What do we want to train our minds for? Where do we want to exist in the patterns we can create in our minds? Where do we want to hold the spotlight of our consciousness? We are now going to look at how we can use imagery and fantasy to create feelings of compassion flowing into ourselves.

Generating Compassion Through Fantasy

So far we have established how much power our minds possess and the fact that we can use fantasies to stimulate various aspects of our brain systems.

We can use the same idea (the power of our fantasies), to create certain images to stimulate soothing feelings. Research shows that if we practice focusing our minds on certain things we can stimulate our brains in certain ways. The next exercises will explore how to stimulate your mind to generate compassion.

Our minds have evolved to respond to the kindness of others. From the day we are born, the care and affection of others has a big impact on our lives. When we feel cared for, valued, understood and validated, our brain feels safe. To recreate these feelings of safety without outside validation is to create fantasy images of a compassionate other relating to the self. It is a practice used many spiritual traditions. Buddhists, for example, spend many hours meditating and focusing on the compassionate Buddha while people who believe in God can imagine God loving them.

You do not have to belief in a faith to feel loved like this. In these exercises, we will ask you to visualise a true compassionate image. It is important to think about an image that is perfect for you. Don't try to 'borrow' one. The important part of the process is to understand what you need to visualise feel compassion. How do you want to feel? Do you want protection? To feel valued? Cared for? It will help if your image has struggled in the same ways that you have.

Do not worry if you struggle at first with these exercises. Your threat system will be activated and will try to block the feelings of pleasure. The more you practice, the more you will be able to ignore the negative feelings and remind yourself that you deserve to feel safe and content.

Creating a Compassionate Image for Your Self

In our next exercise, we are going to focus on receiving compassion. There are many versions of this exercise but this one seems to really help. Start by engaging with your soothing breathing rhythm and smile. Bring your compassionate place to the front of your mind and focus on the sounds, the feel and the sights.

This may now be the place where you wish to create and meet your compassionate image. Visualise your image being created out of a mist in front of you. While this is your own personal image, it is important for this practice that you give your image certain qualities.

These will include:

- **A deep commitment to you** – to help you cope with and relieve your suffering, and take joy in your happiness.
- **Strength of mind** – it cannot become overwhelmed by our pain or distress, but remains present, enduring it with us.
- **Wisdom** gained through experience - it truly understands you and the struggles we go through in life.
- **Warmth** conveyed by kindness, gentleness, care and openness
- **Acceptance** – it is never judgemental or critical, it understands your struggles and accepts you as you are.

Please don't worry about remembering all of these qualities and emotions because you will be guided through them again when we do the imagery.

(NB – these have been changed slightly due to improvement in delivery and the need to include a focus on a 'commitment to the person'. Each aspect is a focus. We also stress the importance of intention and effort above that of emotion more. This is because patients can get hung up on trying to create emotions of warmth, whereas in fact these might be quite a long time in coming. It is the desire, the focus, the intention to experience these things that's important, often with feelings coming later).

So, in each box below think of these qualities (wisdom, strength, warmth and non-judgement) and imagine what they would look, sound or feel like. If nothing comes to mind, or the mind wanders, just gently bring it back to the breathing and practice compassionately accepting this.

Here are some questions that might help you build an image:

- Would you want your caring/nurturing image to feel/look like? Would they be old or young, male or female? Would they be an animal or something else completely such as the sea or the light?
- What colours and sounds are associated with the qualities of wisdom, strength, warmth and non-judgement?

Remember that your image really wants you to be free of suffering, and/or to be able to deal with difficulties and to flourish. It knows that we all just find ourselves here, living as we do, trying to make the best of our minds and lives. It understands that our minds are difficult, that emotions can run riot and this is not our fault. Practice experiencing what it's like to focus on the feeling that another mind really values you and cares about you unconditionally. Now focus on the idea that your compassionate ideal is looking at you with great warmth.

Imagine that they have the following deep desires for you:

- That you be well
- That you be happy
- That you be free of suffering

The key to the exercise is not the visual clarity but the focus and practice on the feeling of compassion you receive. While the image may not be a 'real' person, the point is that we are trying to tackle your own attitude towards yourself, particularly feelings of shame or self-criticism. While it may indeed be desirable to find people who are caring, it's also very desirable that you create these feelings within you.

Being Understood and Known

Your compassionate image understands the difficulty and complexity of being a human being. There is probably nothing that you can feel or do or imagine that another human hasn't done at some point. Your compassionate image knows that you are working with the brain that you didn't design. It understands and fully accepts you. Compassion is not a 'fair weather friend', it only wishes for you to be free from suffering and to be happy.

Worksheet for Building your Ideal Compassionate Image

How would you like your ideal caring, compassionate image to look/appear e.g. visual qualities?

How would you like your ideal caring, compassionate image to sound, e.g. tone of voice?

What other sensory qualities can you give to it?

How would you like your ideal caring, compassionate image to relate to you?

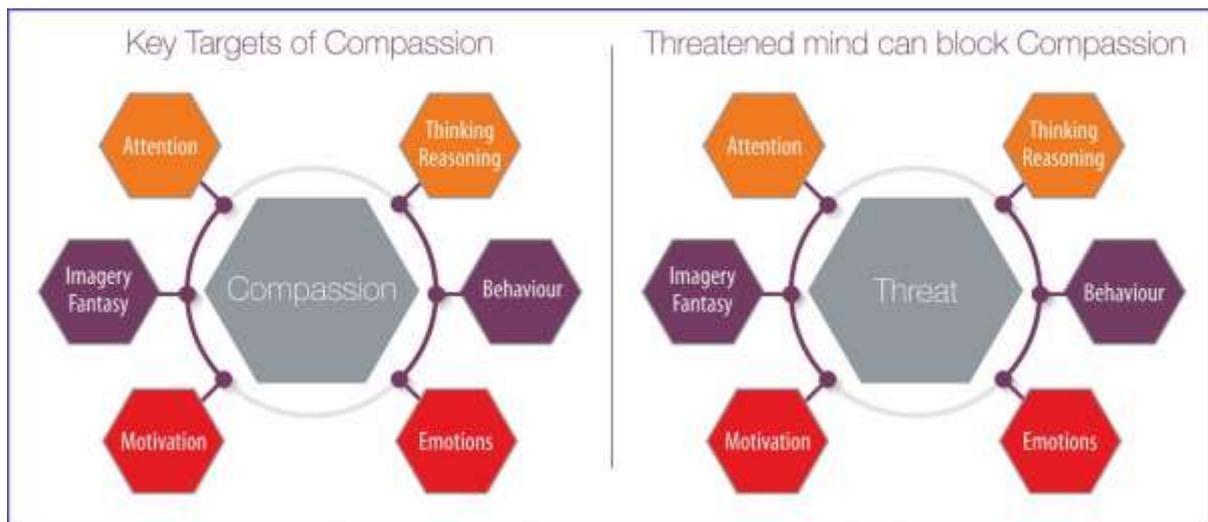
How would like to relate to your ideal caring, compassionate image?

You might have different feelings if you change the gender of your image – this can raise interesting fears worthy of exploration.

The Skills of Compassion: Compassionate Attention, Thinking, Behaviour and Feeling

We will be exploring the use of imagery to develop feelings and ideas of compassion. If you look back to the section on “what is compassion” you will see that we talked about the skills of compassion in terms of learning how to pay attention compassionately, learning how to think compassionately, learning how to behave compassionately and learning how to create feelings of compassion.

When we learn compassion, it directs us to act in an unbiased way and balances our emotions and behaviour but it is directly affected by our threat system as in in the diagram below.



To help us in our pursuit of compassion, we can ask ourselves a number of questions:

- Is this thinking helpful to me?
- Would I think like this if I weren't upset?
- Would I teach a child or friend to think like this?
- If not, how would I like to teach and to think about these things?
- How might I think about this when I am at my compassionate best?

The key is being mindful of your thoughts with the intention of trying to find a compassionate and balanced approach.

Compassionate Letter Writing

Keep in mind that all the exercises that we are doing is to develop a compassionate mind to help us find the courage to face up to the difficult things and/or self-acceptance.

We are training our minds and while we learn, we can help ourselves by writing letters. In this exercise, we are going to write about difficulties, but from the perspective of our compassionate self. Start by engaging with your soothing breathing rhythm.

Next move into your compassionate self; remembering you at your best, your calmest, your wisest and your most caring. Imagine yourself as you would ideally like to be in terms of being mature and powerfully compassionate. Now try to feel your compassionate self. As you focus on it, feel yourself expanding slightly and stronger. Imagine you are a compassionate person who is wise, kind, warm and understanding.

Consider your general manner, tone of voice and the feelings that come with your caring compassion self. Adopt a smile and try to feel the kindness in your face before moving on. Think about the qualities you would like your compassionate self to have.

Spend time feeling and gently exploring what those qualities are like. Remember, it does not matter if you actually feel you are like this, but focus on what the ideal you would like to be - it is your intentions that are important. Spend at least one minute, longer if possible, thinking about this. When we are in a compassionate frame of mind (even just slightly), we try to use our personal experiences of life wisely.

We know that life can be hard; we offer our strength and support and try to be warm and non-judgemental. Take a few breaths and try to sense and feel that wise, compassionate part of you grow. This is the part of you that will write the letter. If thoughts of 'am I doing it right?' arise, just note these thoughts and re-focus your attention. Observe what happens as you write. There is no right or wrong, only the effort of trying – it is the practice that helps. As you write, try to create as much emotional warmth and understanding as you can. You are practising writing these letters from your compassionate side.

As you write your letter, allow yourself to understand and accept your distress. For example, your letter might start with: 'I am sad. I feel distressed; my distress is understandable because.....' Note the reasons. Realizing your distress makes sense. Then, perhaps you could continue with 'I would like me to know that.....'

For example, your letter might point out that as we become stressed or depressed, this frame of mind comes with a powerful set of thoughts and feelings – so how you see things right now may not be how you always see them. We can try to focus on how best to cope. For example, 'It might be helpful to consider. . .'

A second way of doing this is to imagine your compassionate image writing to you and imagining a dialogue with them. For example, my compassionate image might say something like:

'Hi Paul, Gosh, the last few days have been tough. Isn't it typical of life that problems arrive in groups rather than individually. It's understandable why you're feeling a bit down because . . . Hang in there because you are good at seeing these as the ups and downs of life. There have been times before when things have seemed dark but they pass and you have shown a lot of courage in dealing with this very tricky brain that is so tough at times. So you have developed

abilities for getting through this and tolerating the painful things. If we stand back for a minute let's see what happened if we take a wider view and we were talking to a friend – how we would...’ If we are mindful we can see our consciousness like a boat riding on this storm - but we are not the storm – we can observe the arising of the feeling in us as part of our brain design.

You will note that the letter points to my strengths and my abilities. It doesn't issue instructions.

This is important in compassionate writing. You don't want your compassionate letters to seem as if they are written by some smart bod who is giving you lots of advice. There has to be a real appreciation for your suffering, a real appreciation for your struggle and a real appreciation for your efforts at getting through – it's an arm round your shoulder in support.

An example

Here's a letter from someone we'll call Sally, about lying in bed feeling depressed. Before looking at this letter, let's note an important point - we are going to refer to 'you' rather than 'I'. Some people like to write their letters like that, as if writing to someone else. See what works for you, but over time try to use 'I'.

'Good morning Sally, the last few days have been tough for you so no wonder you want to hide away in bed. Sometimes we just get to the point of shutdown, don't we, and the thought of taking on things is overwhelming. You know you have been trying real hard but have felt exhausted through no fault of your own I mean you haven't put your feet up with a gin and tonic and the daily paper. I guess the thing now is to work out what helps you. You've shown a lot of courage in the past in pushing yourself to do things that you find difficult. Lie in bed if you think that it can help you, of course, but watch out for critical Sally who could be critical about this. Also, you often feel better if you get up, tough as it is. What about a cup of tea? You often like that first cup of tea. Okay, so let's get up, move around a bit and get going and then see how we feel. Tough, but let's try . . .'

The point here is about understanding, being helpful, having a caring focus - but at the same time working on what we need to do to help ourselves.

Guides to letter writing

When you have written your first few compassionate letters, go through them with an open mind and think whether they actually capture compassion for you. If they do, see if you can spot the following qualities in your letter:

- It expresses concern and genuine care.
- It is sensitive to your distress and needs.
- It is sympathetic and responds emotionally to your distress.
- It helps you to face your feelings and become more tolerant of them.
- It helps you become more understanding and reflective of your feelings, difficulties and dilemmas.
- It is non-judgemental/non-condemning.
- A genuine sense of warmth, understanding and caring permeates the whole letter.
- It helps you think about the behaviour you may need to adopt in order to get better.

Depressed people can struggle with this to begin with. Their letters tend to be full of finger-wagging advice. The point of these letters is not just to focus on difficult feelings but to help you reflect on your feelings and thoughts, be open with them and develop a compassionate and balanced way of working with them.

The letters should not offer advice or tell you what you should or shouldn't do. Support is what you need.

Compassionate Behaviour

Now we move onto behaviour. How can we develop compassionate behaviour?

As frequently mentioned, it our intentions and our behaviour that matter - even if we don't always have the feelings to go with them.

Compassionate behaviour is doing things to help ourselves and/or others to develop, improve and/or deal with suffering. If we're honest, when we are upset we may do lots of things that give us temporary relief, but this is not really in our best interests.

For example, we might drink, take drugs, eat too much - all very understandable. The chances are though, when things calm down we will be disappointed in ourselves. Sometimes it takes us a while to think about and make a commitment to behave in ways that are genuinely in our best interest such as learning how to face up to and deal with certain emotions.

Commitment

It's important to find ways you can commit yourself to compassionate behaviour, to really focus on the advantage of it. One way is to create an image in your mind of how you would like to be and focus on that. Remember that there will be times when you're angry or frustrated and don't want to carry through on your commitment to looking after yourself properly. This is understandable of course, but,

to the best of your ability, you need to notice and be compassionate to your anger and frustration. If the desire is to give up, then allow yourself to settle down and rekindle your commitment.

The path ahead will have many ups, downs and internal battles. For some people these battles are much more intense than for others, but over time we will focus on behaviour that will help us and others in the long term.

Practice Diaries

Practice diaries are a good way to keep notes about some of the exercises you will try, and can help you see how you are getting on - your personal observations, what your compassionate mind says and your successes, no matter how small.

The Fear and Blocking of Compassion

Some people recognize that they are simply not used to a compassionate way of thinking and it seems odd to them, but they can understand its value and the importance of practice. However, other people are much more resistant. For example, they may feel they do not deserve to be compassionate, they may see it as a weakness, or a self-indulgence, or even selfishness. If these beliefs are strongly held they can get in the way of practice.

One way around this is to simply note these beliefs as common, but to practice anyway. Think about it like physiotherapy. If you had a weak muscle in your leg, perhaps as a result of injury, you wouldn't tell yourself you don't deserve to have a stronger muscle. Only once you have built these qualities can you decide whether to use them.

For some people, kindness deeply touches them and can make them sad. Deep down, most of us want to be cared about and feel connected to others. Depression is such an isolating experience and there is often a yearning inside for reconnection. If possible, just stay with these feelings and mindfully allow them to come through.

If you find them too overwhelming, you may prefer to work first with the safe place imagery in 'becoming the compassionate self'. However, trying to create 'kindness and helpfulness in our thinking' is what's important. Just keep your focus on the feelings of kindness and notice if other feelings creep in. Smile compassionately and bring the attention back to exactly what it is you want to focus on.

If this is too difficult, stay with the processes that you find tolerable and build up from there. Only go with things you feel comfortable with. Another major block to compassion is anger. People who struggle with depression can also struggle with anger, or even admitting they have anger.

Sometimes this anger is just a desire to be acknowledged and appreciated – it is nothing to fear and can be overcome when compassion is understood. However, anger if you are fearful of anger, this can also block compassion. The ability to acknowledge that we suffer with anger can itself be a compassionate thing to do because it's taking ourselves seriously and with honesty.

The Dalai Lama tells a story of how he used to like to fix watches. One day after working on a watch that he was struggling with, he found his frustration mounting until he picked up a hammer and smashed the watch to pieces! It's not so much whether or not we have frustration, anger or rage, it's how we acknowledge it, our attitudes to it and how we express it that's important.

Recognizing how painful rage can be is compassionate. Coming to terms with anger rumination being harmful to us is compassionate; learning what to do about our anger is compassionate. Compassion is not about trying to soothe everything or sweep things under the carpet! Sometimes people think that the compassionate approach is letting them off the hook, that it's a soft and easy option. It's far from it.

If you suffer from agoraphobia the compassionate approach is not to give up and stay indoors. The compassionate approach is to acknowledge that you are going to have to work with your anxiety and to practice getting out more and more each day.

Compassion helps us to develop the courage we need in order to confront and work with things we might be avoiding. It is about honesty and developing courage, which is not always easy. Through kindness, we can learn to face powerful anxiety and rage, the difficulties and tragedies of our lives and gradually find some peace within. There is nothing weak about this journey and sometimes it can move us in deep ways.

Summary

As we have seen, our brain is highly complex and has evolved over many millions of years developing different patterns and potential states of mind. There is the angry self, the anxious self, the 'wanting to be loved self', the excited self, the proud self, ashamed self - all of which display different emotions, thoughts and behaviour. These patterns can also be affected by bodily states such as exhaustion or illness.

And, of course, powerful emotional memories can be triggered and affect our bodies. Traumatic experiences are rooted in anxiety and anger and without the chance to develop other patterns, we become defensive.

Compassionate mind training gives us an opportunity to develop different patterns within our brains and therefore have a different sense of ourselves and find inner peace. It's not always the easiest path to take, but if we commit ourselves to the journey, we give ourselves the chance to reap the life-changing benefits.