



connect

wellbeing, ability, recovery

Self-Compassion in Self-Isolation

An important concept in Compassion Focussed Therapy (Paul Gilbert) is trying to treat ourselves as we would a close friend or family member.

We often show compassion to important people in our lives by:

- *Listening empathetically*
- *Giving them a hug*
- *Making time for someone without any other distractions*
- *Being understanding about their mistakes or difficult emotional reactions*
- *Making a gesture (e.g. a gift or doing something nice for them)*

Lots of people are very good at doing this for others, but very bad at doing it for themselves!

For many people, when they are being hard on themselves, or are worrying so much about others that they completely forget about their own needs, or just really need a hug, other people step up to fill the compassion gap. So what do we do when those people aren't around as much?

We can use self-compassion, but it doesn't come naturally to most people, so requires practice. Hopefully the following exercises will get you started. Remember, it will feel uncomfortable to start, but like anything the more you do it the more natural and habitual it becomes.

Part 1: Coping without cuddles

One exercise in Compassion Focussed Therapy is the 'self-compassionate touch' exercise. This can feel strange, as very few of us practice it regularly. However, the evidence suggests that firm touch (such as a hug) can result in improved emotional wellbeing, including when it comes from ourselves.

Sometimes this might be a case of actually giving yourself a big hug. One way to do this (if you can!) is to sit with your knees pulled up to your chest and wrap your arms around them. If it's difficult to get your legs to your chest, you can just hold onto your own shoulders.

If this feels too odd, it can help to get a hot water bottle. The weight and heat of the bottle can add to the effect, and it gives you something to wrap your arms around rather than just yourself!

Alternatively giving your upper arm a good squeeze or rub with the opposite hand can be effective. Try some of these now and see which feel most helpful!

If that is still a bit too far out of your comfort zone, you might want to consider using a massager or massage ball to apply firm, compassionately-intentioned touch in a more familiar context.



Part 2: Making time for ourselves

It is ironic that when we have more time on our hands that is often when we become worst at setting any of that aside for self-care or 'me-time'. Just as you would with a friend, it is really important to:

1. Schedule in this time (with yourself) ahead of time, rather than just fitting it in when it's convenient or postponing it until tomorrow
2. Choose to do something you'll enjoy, but make sure it's not so distracting you don't have time to catch up (with yourself). Maybe you could go for a stroll or do some colouring or have a coffee break- an activity that only uses a little of your attention so you can use the rest up on communicating (with yourself).
3. Be ready to listen, even if the content is difficult, and don't shut down difficult feelings by trying to come up with solutions or distractions. Just be there with the emotion. Validate the feelings and try to understand why they're there. Demonstrate (to yourself) that it's ok to feel like that given the circumstances.
4. Be understanding about mistakes and unusual or unhelpful emotional reactions. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, and it's totally normal to snap or cry or say something that could sound a bit thoughtless when we're under lots of stress. Acknowledge (to yourself) that that's ok, and not a reflection on who someone is (or you are) as an individual.
5. If they (you) are really down, consider what you might do to cheer them (yourself) up- a hug? A gift? Making a plan to do something really fun?

Part 3: Positive self-talk

Sometimes we talk to ourselves unkindly, calling ourselves names like 'stupid', 'useless', 'ugly', 'ungrateful' (or worse!) in our heads, or chastising ourselves for a mistake we made in the past. Sometimes we load ourselves up with blame and responsibility ('that was my fault' / 'I should be able to cope better'). Firstly it is important to start paying attention to these thoughts and notice which ones come up most frequently.

What is a common self-critical thought that you've had recently?

When you catch yourself having these thoughts, ask yourself 'How would I respond to a friend saying these things?'

Look back at the self-critical thought you wrote down now and imagine your closest friend or family member saying that to you. How would you respond? What would you say and do?

Now write the statement out again, but change the 'you's to 'I's.

Can you say it to yourself out loud? Remember- saying nice things to ourselves rarely feels easy, but the more you practice the more natural it will become.



Part 4: Compassionate gestures

When someone's having a really tough time, we might buy them something they like, make them something, cook them their favourite meal or plan a 'night off' with them where they can just relax and/or have fun.

We usually put more time and effort into people when they are feeling down, but when we are feeling low ourselves it can be hard to find the energy or the motivation to think up nice things to do just for us. Use the ideas below to create a list of self-compassionate things you can do for yourself when you are feeling down.

Buy or order my favourite food/drink/flowers/other treats.

Make myself something I'd like.

A few ideas if you're not sure.

- *Sew a small fabric pouch and fill with grains and a few drops of essential oils- you can microwave it to keep you warm at night, or to lay over your eyes when you're practicing relaxation*
- *Make a desk tidy for all your 'working from home' goodies*
- *Bake a cake and decorate it nicely- just for you!*

Cook/make my absolute favourite meal (all 3 courses!).

My ideal 'night in' (given the circumstances)

- *Who will you call? What film will you watch? What will you eat? Will you play music? What will you do to relax that bit extra?*



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