

Cultivating the three flow of compassion

As human beings, most of us have a natural capacity for compassion. Compassion is a natural and automatic response that has ensured our survival. Louis Cozolino pointed out: *“We are not the survival of the fittest. We are the survival of the nurtured.”* He further added: *“Those who are nurtured best, survive best.”*



Compassion is fundamental to our basic nature and enhances our everyday experience of being human at a personal level as well as interpersonal, organisational and social levels. There is an increasing body of research indicating that cultivating compassion for oneself and others has significant benefits such as promoting wellbeing, resilience and social connection (Neff & Germer, 2017).

Compassion is defined as the feeling that arises when we notice the struggles in ourselves and others associated with the commitment to alleviate and prevent the suffering. Cultivating compassion for ourselves and others, helps us to develop the strength to cope with suffering, to take compassionate action, and the to prevent compassion fatigue.

Compassionate resilience

Delivering health, educational and welfare services with compassion increases satisfaction and engagement. However, overtime for a variety of reasons, helping professionals may start showing symptoms of empathic distress fatigue, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and burnout, all of which negatively impact the quality of care delivered and the level of compassion offered to others and themselves.

Providing a continuous external flow of compassion, in the absence of self-compassion, can lead to depletion and burnout. Helping professionals greatly benefit from compassionate mind training where they actively promote the three flows of compassion.

The Three Flow of Compassion

Paul Gilbert (2010) designed a Compassionate Mind Training Program which aimed to cultivate an image of a compassionate self and to promote three flow defined as:

- Compassion for others (compassion flowing out), which involves an awareness of the experience of compassion in the self, and then direct this compassion outward towards other people
- Compassion from others (compassion flowing in), which refers to the experience of receiving and accepting compassion from other people
- Compassion from our self to our self (self-compassion), where we attend to ourselves with sensitivity and understanding to support and care for ourselves. Here we send and receive compassion from the self to other part of the self who are struggling.

Each of those abilities have their obstacles and can be cultivated through visualisations, meditation and intentional actions. Focused training on each specific aspect of the three flow of compassion, will strengthen the overall capacity to attend to ourselves and others with compassion, to build increasing compassionate resilience.

There is a growing body of research indicating that cultivating self-compassion helps us to deal with our distress and trauma in the workplace, as well as promote our ability to deliver compassionate care towards others. Often helping professionals are more comfortable offering compassion to others than themselves and find it difficult to receive care and compassion from others. Cultivating the three flows of compassion provides a more sustainable approach.

The following two exercises aim to cultivate the three flows of compassion beginning with cultivating an image of an inner compassionate self which offers compassion to others, as well as ourselves receiving compassion from others but also offering compassion to the self (self-compassion) where one attends and receives compassion from the self to the self.

Visualisation of practising a chosen flow of compassion

First, identify a flow of compassion where you notice inner resistance where you would like to cultivate more ease.

Affirm, your intention to cultivate this flow such as:

May I receive compassion from others with ease

May I be compassionate to others

May I give myself the compassion that I need

Second, visualise a situation from your past where this flow was required or a future event where this flow will be required.

During the visualisation, noticing the resistance, the discomfort, letting it be as it is. Explore how you can bring acceptance and kindness to the unease, allowing yourself to be as you are. And in your way, at your pace, re-affirm gently your intention in your visualisation. Visualise, as best as you can, yourself making progressive steps in engaging in some way in the practice of this flow of compassion.

For instance, if it is difficult for you to receive compassion from others, call to mind a past situation where someone was praising you or was being kind, understanding or helpful to you. Notice the initial resistance and possibly avoidance, with acceptance and kindness, letting yourself be as you are. Then see if you can imagine allowing yourself to receive this praise and kindness with calm and appreciation. Visualising yourself smiling and accepting the kindness with delight. What would you like to have said to this person in return? How would you like to express your gratitude? Can you imagine yourself saying “thank you” to this person? Then letting go of the scene and notice what is here for you reaffirming your intention.

You may need to practice this visualisation many times before the situation becomes easier for you.

Explore how you can also change your behaviour in such a situation where you become more relaxed and expressed gratitude.

Loving-kindness meditation

The practice of loving-kindness meditation can help us to cultivate the three flows of compassion.

We send out loving-kindness to a loved one,

May you be happy

May you be well

May you be healthy

May you have peace

May you have ease of being

We imagine our loved-one in return wishing us well (receiving good will from others) saying:

May you be happy

May you be well

May you be healthy

May you have peace

May you have ease of being

We offer ourselves loving-kindness phrases (self-compassion)

May I be happy

May I be well

May I be healthy

May I have peace

May I have ease of being

If you wish, you could also offer similar loving kindness phrases to a neutral person or a difficult person

You may end the practice by offering compassion to all being:

May we all be free of suffering and live with ease and peace

Here is a link to some free loving-kindness meditations audio

<https://www.mindfulpath.com.au/resources/meditations>

<https://www.bloomfieldpsychology.com.au/resources/free-mindfulness-meditations>

For more information on Compassionate Mind Training and the three flows of compassion you can access a manual written by Paul Gilbert (2010) "Training Our Minds in, with and for Compassion: An Introduction to Concepts and Compassion-Focused Exercises"

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/GILBERT-COMPASSION-HANDOUT.pdf>

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