SELF-COMPASSION

Taking Care of You

Bob Horowitz, MD
bnhorowitz@gmail.com
Disclosure

I currently teach Mindful Self-Compassion at El Camino Hospital in Mountain View, CA.
Modern Life
Living Well

How you relate to your life

- Positive outlook
- Resilience: Rebounding from negative emotions
- Caring for ourselves and others

Compassion | Self-Compassion
Our Compassionate Instinct

• Compassion is recognizing and “being moved by another’s suffering and wanting to help”. (Lazarus)

• Evolutionary perspective: we’re biologically hardwired to care → improves survival

• Being compassionate is associated with:
  - better mental and physical health
  - better relationships

• Compassion is an innate capacity and a skill that can be trained and improved.

A Demanding World

Drive and Resource-seeking System

- **Goals:** Wanting, pursuing, achieving, consuming
- **Emotions:** Driven, excited, pleasure
- **Neurotransmitter:** dopamine
- **Output:** Activating

Threat-focused System “fight/flight/freeze”

- **Goals:** Protection and safety
- **Emotions:** Anxiety, depression
- **Neurotransmitter:** adrenergic, cholinergic (sympathetic/parasympathetic NS)
- **Output:** Activating/inhibiting
Soothing/Affiliative System
- **Goals:** Safeness/kindness
- **Emotions:** content, safe, connected
- **Transmitter:** endorphins, oxytocin, cholinergic (parasympathetic NS)
- **Output:** Soothing

Specific neural circuits

Positive emotions
- Reward

Compassion Training

Born to Care

Drive and Resource-seeking System

Threat-focused System
- “fight/flight/freeze”
Empathy: Understanding Others

Empathy:
set of capabilities that enable us to share and understand the internal states (thoughts, feelings) of others

Affective (Emotional) Empathy:
taking on embodied and emotional aspects of another’s experience

Cognitive Empathy:
conceptually understanding another's intentions, beliefs, and emotions

early, automatic

late

experience sharing
Not All Caring is Compassion: Empathy and Compassion Are Different

• Affective empathy is largely automatic.

• Mirroring negative emotions can cause caregivers distress & burnout.

• Compassion is recognizing and being moved by another’s suffering and wanting to help.

• Compassion training may enhance emotion regulation and protect against empathic distress.
Can compassion protect us from empathic distress?

Affective group (25)
- Empathy training

Memory group (28)
- Memory task
- Pre
- Post 1
- Post 2

Can compassion protect us from empathic distress?

- Empathy increased with training, but was associated with greater negative affect.
- After compassion training: Positive affect increased (even while seeing distressing images).
- Compassion training → generate positive feelings that enable us to turn toward difficult emotions rather than pushing them away.

Neuroplasticity

“neurons that fire together wire together”

Experience and practice change brain structure
The Circle of Compassion

Extending Compassion

Receiving Compassion

Self-Compassion

Adapted from Courage of Care Coalition – J. Makransky, B. Lavelle
“Love is All Around”
Self-Compassion: Befriending Ourselves

- “Self-compassion is simply giving the same kindness to ourselves that we would give to others.” - C. Germer

- **Elements of self-compassion** (K. Neff):
  - **Mindfulness**: “This is really hard for me.”
  - **Common humanity**: “I’m not alone - other people have felt like this.”
  - **Self-kindness**: “May I be OK with this”, “I hope to learn from this.”
Reflective Writing Exercise
“We give ourselves compassion not to feel better but because we feel bad.”

Myth: “Self-compassion will make me selfish.”

Self-compassion:
- greater compassion for others
- show more caring, support, and compromise in romantic relationships
Myth: “I’ll become self-indulgent.”

Self-compassion

Engage in healthier behaviors:
• exercise
• eating well
• less problem drinking
• seeing a healthcare provider
**Myth:** “I’ll wallow in self-pity.”

- More perspective-taking rather than focusing on distress.
- More realistic self-appraisals and taking responsibility for mistakes.

**Self-compassion**
Myth: “Self-compassion will make me weak.”

Self-compassion

More able to cope with divorce, trauma, and chronic pain.
The Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion

Yin:
- Comforting
- Soothing
- Validating

Yang:
- Protecting
- Providing
- Motivating

Myth: “I’ll lose my motivation.”
### Self-Criticism vs Self-Compassion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Criticism</th>
<th>Self-Compassion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Am I good enough?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benefits of Self-Compassion

- Happiness
- Optimism
- Connectedness
- Curiosity
- Creativity
- Forgiveness
- + Health-related behaviors

Embracing negative feelings

- ↑ Acknowledging
- ↑ Perspective-taking
- ↓ Self-criticism
- ↓ Rumination
- ↓ Isolation

Greater Well-being

↓ Anxiety, depression
↓ Overwhelm w/others’ distress
“Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass...It's about learning to dance in the rain.”
Reflective Writing Exercise
Compassionate Letter to Yourself

- Guided introduction
- Take a few minutes to write a letter to yourself (1 paragraph)

Writing a compassionate letter to yourself daily for 1 week:
- ↑happiness sustained at 6 mos
- ↓ depression sustained at 3 mos

Compassion Training

• 8-9 week group programs
  • Mindful Self-Compassion
  • Compassion Cultivation Training - (Stanford CCARE)

• Benefits:
  • ↑compassion, ↑mindfulness
  • ↑happiness, life satisfaction, connectedness
  • ↓anxiety, depression, worry

Low Self-Compassion Predicts Physician Burnout

Prevalence of Burnout by Self-Compassion

- Lowest quartile: 60%
- Second quartile: 36%
- Third quartile: 23%
- Highest quartile: 10%

2016 Stanford Physician Wellness Survey
One for Me, One for You:
Self-Compassion Training for Physician Well-being

• Core Principles
  - Mindset of self-compassion
  - Convenience
    • Training in the clinic
    • Short classes (30 min/wk x 8 wk)
    • Brief just-in-time practices (< 3 min)

• Improvements in self-kindness and ability to evoke components of self-compassion

Take a breath
The Power of Kindness

Heaven
Resources - Books

- The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook
- Mindful Compassion
- A Fearless Heart
- The Self-Compassion Skills Workbook
- Self-Compassion
- Radical Acceptance
- the mindful path to self-compassion
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Resources - Websites</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Center for Mindful Self-Compassion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Self-compassion training and guided meditations</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kristin Neff</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pioneering researcher has compiled an extensive bibliography of self-compassion literature</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Information about the Compassion Cultivation Training program (includes self-compassion)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://ccare.stanford.edu">http://ccare.stanford.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being With Dying Program</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Professional training program in compassionate care of seriously ill and dying, including provider self-care and resilience</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="https://www.upaya.org/being-with-dying/">https://www.upaya.org/being-with-dying/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tara Brach</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Psychotherapist and meditation teacher offers excellent self-compassion talks and guided meditations</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="https://www.tarabrach.com">https://www.tarabrach.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>