

Using Compassion to Take Back Your Power

Having compassion for your PTSD and substance abuse is a way to “take back your power.” One of the most troubling aspects of PTSD and substance abuse is that you feel powerless over them—they are controlling you rather than you controlling them. “Compassion” means accepting and respecting yourself. The opposite of compassion is harshness. Rather than blaming yourself, the goal is to understand and really listen to yourself at a deep level. This can make it easier to heal from PTSD and substance abuse.

Compassion may feel very difficult to do. It is easier to “beat yourself up” and hate yourself, especially if you grew up in a family where this is how you were treated. With PTSD and substance abuse, you may view yourself as sick, damaged, weak, crazy, bad, or lazy. There may be people in your life who view you in those ways too. However, it is helpful to understand your PTSD and substance abuse as attempts to survive and cope. It has been said that “these symptoms simultaneously conceal and reveal their origins; they speak in disguised language of secrets too terrible for words” (Herman, 1992, p. 96).

This does not mean that the PTSD and substance abuse should continue. Indeed, the major goal of this treatment is to help you overcome PTSD and substance abuse by learning safe ways of coping. But it helps to understand your PTSD and substance abuse as signs of distress. It is like having a fever when you are ill—it tells you that you need to get help and take good care of yourself.

COMPASSION FOR YOUR PTSD

PTSD can be understood as an attempt by your mind and body to survive overwhelming trauma. PTSD symptoms may have helped you to “tune out” the terrible trauma . . . protect yourself from further harm . . . feel more in control of an uncontrollable situation . . . feel safer . . . adapt to your environment . . . get people to notice your pain.

Examples of Viewing PTSD Symptoms with Compassion

Suicidal thinking

Harsh view: “I’m hopeless. What’s wrong with me? I should just get over it already.”

Compassionate view: “It’s my way to feel more in control, by choosing life or death. In therapy I can learn other ways to feel control, but suicidal thoughts make sense after what I’ve lived through.”

Relationship problems

Harsh view: “I’m unlovable. I deserved what happened to me. I’m a bad person.”

Compassionate view: “I learned not to trust people, and that helped me survive. I can keep working on relationship issues, but I need to be respectful of myself and why I have these problems.”

★ Write a harsh versus compassionate view of your PTSD. (Continue on back for more space.)

Harsh view: _____

Compassionate view: _____

(cont.)

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COMPASSION FOR YOUR SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Substance abuse can be understood as a misguided attempt to cope with PTSD and other problems.

Using substances may have been a way to numb the pain . . . get to sleep . . . escape negative feelings . . . forget about the past . . . get through the day . . . access feelings or memories that you know are there . . . try to feel normal . . . show people how bad you feel because you can't put it into words . . . compensate for your suffering . . . give you some pleasure in life . . . feel in control . . . feel accepted by people . . . get rid of dissociation and flashbacks.

Viewing your substance abuse with compassion does not mean "It's okay to use, or "If I use, I can excuse myself because I was trying to numb the pain." A major goal of this treatment is to *eliminate all substance use*. If you truly view your substance abuse with compassion, you will strive to eliminate it completely because you will see that, in the long run, it brings you only misery and dysfunction. Although it may sometimes work in the short run to "self-medicate" problems, it never works in the long run.

Examples of Viewing Substance Abuse with Compassion

Can't stop using substances

Harsh view: "I'm such a failure. Look what I turned into—I have no self-control; what a wreck."

Compassionate view: "My substance abuse has been a way to try to deal with my overwhelming PTSD symptoms. I've been trying to numb the pain. I now need to learn other ways to cope. Substance abuse is a medical illness, and I need help with it."

Lying about substance use

Harsh view: "I'm a no-good liar. I lie to my partner, my kids, my doctor. I hate my life."

Compassionate view: "I need to stop lying so I can recover. But there are real reasons why I lie about my substance abuse: shame, guilt, feeling bad about myself. I need help working on these."

★ *Write a harsh versus compassionate view of your substance abuse. (Continue on back for more space.)*

Harsh view: _____

Compassionate view: _____

STRENGTHS FROM ADVERSITY

Another way to view PTSD and substance abuse with compassion is to recognize the *strengths* you may have developed—the "gifts from suffering." Usually, the most profound growth occurs from overcoming difficult experiences. PTSD and substance abuse may have given you the ability to survive under tough conditions . . . imagination and creativity . . . depth . . . spirituality . . . sensitivity to others . . . awareness of the extremes in life . . . the ability to persist despite pain and setbacks . . . appreciation for animals, children, and people outside the mainstream . . . responsiveness to art and nature.

★ *Do you notice any personal strengths from your struggles with PTSD and substance abuse? (Continue on back for more space.)* _____

