

Extending Compassion to Myself vs. Self-pity

By Jan Weetjens¹

Some of my coaching clients cringe at the idea of extending compassion towards themselves. When I ask why, they often say they are concerned about falling into self-pity. However, self-pity is the opposite of self-compassion. Let's examine how, and explore what it means to be compassionate with ourselves ...

When something bad happens to us, our natural reaction is to seek comfort, protection, and reassurance. When my boss yells at me, when my partner ignores me, when my friend betrays me, we look for somebody or some place where we can be safe, collect ourselves, and feel understood and supported. However, such a person or space is often not available, and we find ourselves often alone and lonely, grappling with the hurt and pain that can at times be overwhelming.

It is only natural that, in those moments, we feel pity for ourselves. If nobody is available to hold us and to say: "Poor you... let me hold you...", we can at least do that for ourselves. The warmth and tenderness of the pity we feel for ourselves can become a place where we can keep the hurt that was done to us at bay, and experience that the pain we feel is not our whole reality.

However, while the initial reaction of feeling pity for oneself is only natural, understandable, and healthy, it is helpful not to stay there. When we dwell there, we can get caught up in self-pity. When that happens, we are trapped in a narrative about how much we are the victim of unfair circumstances.

Defining myself as the victim is quite convenient: when I do so, I do not need to take any responsibility for my actions, feelings, or thoughts. On the contrary: the fact that I see myself as the victim justifies behaviors that would otherwise be unacceptable. For example, when I feel victimized because my partner, my boss, my friend etc. is not doing his or her part in... (fill in the blank...), I feel justified in being grumpy, passive aggressive, judgmental, withdrawn, etc. or to withhold my best efforts, my affection, compassion, understanding, and love. When I fall in self-pity, I refuse any accountability.

To use the concept of the "Circle of Influence"², self-pity is entirely focused on the elements that are *outside* my control, which is the reason why self-pity can be so dangerously seductive: It provides me with the perfect excuse and rationale not to look at any aspects of my current reality that are *within* my control (including my own actions, thoughts, and feelings). I can

¹ The ideas developed in this article build on the teachings of people like Eckhart Tolle, Tara Brach, Thomas Hübl, Michael Bernard Beckwith, and many others.

² Stephen Covey: "The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People"

blame the other and see very clearly what, why, and how the other is at fault, feel sorry for myself, and, in addition, feel totally justified not to change (after all, I am right, and the other is wrong!).

Extending compassion towards myself is the very opposite of self-pity. But what does this mean? And what, in practical terms, does it look like to extend compassion towards myself?

Extending compassion towards myself starts with the simple (but far from easy) step of allowing myself to see how the circumstances I encounter are affecting and even triggering me. This is very different from playing the narrative in my head of how unfair, wrong, etc. what happened was. It has more to do with giving myself permission to realize that the impact the circumstances are having on me has more to do with my trigger points, than with the specifics of the circumstances. Indeed, if I would experience the same circumstances at a time where I am more rested, or that I feel more in control or appreciated, they may affect me much less, if at all. Similarly, if something that deeply triggers me would happen to a different person, that person may have a very different reaction, simply because his or her trigger points are very different from mine. When I “own” my situation, I shift my attention away from whatever it is that I experienced (which is outside my control). Instead, I gently invite myself to look inside and to explore what it is like to be triggered. I invite myself to be present in the here and now to how I *experience* what happened (which is within my control). In other words, I invite myself to own my experience. Let’s explore a little more what this means...

It does *not* mean that I ignore what happened, that I capitulate to the injustice, violence, disrespect, etc., or that I say it is “OK”. Instead, it means that I do not give whatever happened to me the power to control or define me. I decide not to dwell on it and, by doing so, amplify its negative impact on me. I rather let it be for what it is and focus on my own experience.

Obviously, there are many cases where what happened calls for action or a response of some sort. The invitation to look inside does also not mean that I refrain from an appropriate response. What it does mean is that I choose not to act from a place of being triggered by whatever happened. If I would do that, my emotions and upset would cloud my ability to determine the most appropriate course of action and, as a result, my action would most likely not be as effective as the circumstances require. By contrast, looking inside and owning my experience allows me to map out what to do from a place of greater freedom, clarity, and agency.

While this is easy to say, it can be challenging to put into practice. Even relatively minor, or just perceived offenses can really trigger us. And that is OK. Extending compassion to myself does not mean that I don’t allow myself to be triggered, or that I “force” myself to focus on my own experience. Compassion does not mean that I become judgmental about the fact that I am triggered, but rather that I gently invite myself to shift my focus from the outside (what happened to me) to the inside (how is it affecting me) when I am ready to make that shift.

This process of compassionately exploring how I experience the situation starts with first **acknowledging how I feel**: What are the feelings I am experiencing? Do I feel angry? Sad? Fearful? Guilty? Ashamed? ... Often, and especially when we are really triggered, we may experience a complex cocktail of feelings that can be overwhelming and difficult to unpack. In addition, the feelings can be much more complex than we first realize. For example, while the feeling that is most prominent in my awareness may be anger, I may discover that, underneath that anger is a lot of sadness, or disappointment, embarrassment or fear. Becoming aware, acknowledging, and naming all the emotions that are there, experiencing how they are intertwined, and sensing how strong they are is an important prerequisite for compassion: it allows us to unearth what part of our experience is in need of our compassion.

The most effective way to explore our feelings is to **listen to our body**. When we stay in our mind alone or, in other words, when we just listen to what “the voice in our head” tells us about what we feel, we are at real risk to remain disconnected from what is really going on. In fact, the “voice in the head” is not able to articulate what I experience because it is typically captured by the narrative of judgment and self-pity. Our bodies, on the other hand, don’t lie. When we can listen to our body and honestly explore what the tension in our jaws, the stress in our shoulders, the upset in our stomach, the constriction around our heart, the tense muscles in our arms and legs, the contraction in our gut, etc. tells us, we can come home to our feelings. Our bodies tell us what we need to know to fully acknowledge our feelings. In this way, our bodies provide us with the grounding that the mind alone cannot provide, but that is necessary for us to connect with compassion. Without this grounding, compassion remains disconnected from the authenticity of our experience and lacks the anchoring necessary to make it real.

Once I can acknowledge my feelings, I can move a step further and **allow myself to have those feelings**. This too can be quite challenging, not just because the emotions are often unpleasant, but even more because we may judge it inappropriate to feel the way we do. For example, I was a few months ago on a night flight. While I was trying to get some sleep to be ready for a busy day upon arrival, two rows behind me a baby kept crying relentlessly, keeping everybody awake. I realized that my feelings evolved from sympathy for the baby and his desperate parents, to irritation by the ongoing wailing, to outright anger that the crying was keeping me from my much-needed sleep. However, when I realized how I was feeling, I felt ashamed: how could I possibly have angry feelings towards a baby who was obviously in need? The self-judgment of how I do feel compared to how I think I should feel holds me to unrealistic standards and can therefore trap me in shame or guilt. Like self-pity, shame and guilt are dead-end feelings: they stem from judgment of what is outside our control (in this case, which feelings arise in me) and, hence, put us in an impasse.

The challenge in the step of “allowing” is not to judge my feelings, and not to push them away, regardless of whether I believe those feelings are appropriate or regardless of how uncomfortable they may be. This includes *all* my feelings, including the feelings of judgment, shame and guilt that may arise. When I allow my feelings to be there, I not only name the feelings. I also decide not to push them away, and not to judge myself over it. “Allowing” does not mean that I give myself permission to act out my negative feelings and to lash out to others.

It rather means that I give myself permission to feel the way I feel, without need to judge, to flee, or to act.

Allowing myself to experience the emotions I am having opens the door to eventually **accepting my feelings**: I do not need to change how I feel or suppress it. Experiencing these emotions does not make me “good” or “bad”. It is only natural that I feel this way, and it is OK that I am experiencing what I feel. After all, I am only human, and the fact that I feel what I feel shows my humanity.

The process of acknowledging, allowing, and accepting the emotions we experience when we are triggered gradually creates a sense of spaciousness around the feeling. A shift can occur so that the feeling is no longer fully occupying my awareness, and so that it loses some of its grip. I "am" no longer angry, but I now hold an angry feeling. I "am" no longer sad, but I hold the feeling of sadness, etc. In that sense, “holding a feeling” is very different from dwelling in the feeling and being colonized by it. When I am trapped in self-pity, the feelings of being the victim, wronged, disrespected, etc. completely overshadow me and cloud my mind and spirit. When I am in self-pity, I cannot take distance from the feeling, and am completely in its grip. By contrast, when I extend compassion to myself, I can allow the feeling to be there without being defined by it. I can take a step back and observe myself in the moment experiencing what I feel. I have the feeling. The feeling does not have me.

From that point of spaciousness and compassion, gratitude can arise, even in the face of very difficult situations or painful feelings. I can be grateful that I can be aware of what I am feeling, for the compassion that comes naturally with the awareness, and even for the feelings themselves. It may be challenging, but when I can rest in that gratitude, there can even be times where that gratitude can expand to include the very circumstances that created the situation in the first place. Rather than pulling me towards depression or anger (which is often the path where self-pity leads us), I can sense a lightness settling in when the negative feelings lose their grip.

In this lightness, I can discover and sense that ***the Self – the “I” who is aware of and holding the feeling – is not only not triggered but is beyond triggering.*** I sense the continuity of my true Self, regardless of what happens in my circumstances or how they affect me. I can sense that, no matter what happened, my true Self remains unaffected and secure, is love and loved, and has the power and agency to take the appropriate action the situation calls for. This safety, love, and power of agency tell me that I am both, and at the same time, a fully authentic and autonomous individuality and one with the world and with the ground of Being. It tells me that ***nothing can alter this fundamental reality.***

When I choose the path of self-pity, I choose to stay in bondage of my circumstances, surrender my agency, and foreclose creativity, love and joy. When, on the other hand, I can own my situation and extend compassion to myself, I reclaim my authenticity and (re)connect to my true Self which was always there, lovingly holding everything that unfolds, and patiently waiting for me to come home again.