

When the Going gets Tough...

Self-pity vs. Compassion for Self

By Jan Weetjens

When they find themselves in tough situations, some of my coaching clients cringe at the idea of extending compassion towards themselves. They say they are concerned about falling into self-pity. However, self-pity is the opposite of compassion for self. Let's examine how.

When something bad happens to us, our natural reaction is to seek comfort, protection, and reassurance. When our boss yells at us, when our partner ignore us, when our friends betray us, we look for somebody or someplace where we can feel safe, collect ourselves, and feel understood. 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 be overwhelming.

It is only natural that, in those moments, we feel pity for ourselves. If nobody is available to hold us and say: "I understand 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 at bay and find at least *some* comfort.

However, while the initial reaction of feeling pity for oneself is only natural, understandable, and healthy, it is helpful not to stay there. For, when we dwell there, we may 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 ourselves as victims is convenient: when we do so, we do not need to take any responsibility for our actions, feelings, or thoughts. On the contrary: the fact that we see ourselves as the victim justifies behaviors that would otherwise be unacceptable. For example, when we feel victimized because our partner, our boss, our friend etc. is not doing his or her part in... (fill in the blank...), we feel justified in being grumpy, passive aggressive, judgmental, withdrawn, etc. or to withhold our best efforts, understanding, and love. When we fall in self-pity, we no longer feel accountable for our actions and behavior.

To use the concept of the "Circle of Influence"¹, self-pity is entirely focused on the elements that are *outside* our control, which is the reason why self-pity can be so dangerously seductive: It provides us with the perfect excuse and rationale not to look at any aspects of our current reality that are *within* our control (including our own actions and thoughts). We can blame the other and see very clearly what, why, and how the other is at fault, feel sorry for ourselves, and, in addition, feel totally justified not to change – after all, we are right, and the other is wrong!

¹ Covey, S. (1989) *The 7 habits of highly successful people*, Free Press

Extending compassion towards ourselves is the very opposite of self-pity. But what does this mean?

Extending compassion towards ourselves starts with the simple (but far from easy) step of allowing ourselves to see how the circumstances we encounter are affecting us. This is very different from playing the narrative in our head of how unfair, wrong, etc. what happened was. It is a shift from a focus on the story of what happened, to the impact it is having on us.

When we allow ourselves to notice how we are impacted, we may see that what we feel has more to do with our trigger points, than with the specifics of the circumstances. Indeed, if we would experience the same circumstances at a time where we are more rested, or that we feel more in control or appreciated, they may affect us much less, if at all. Similarly, if something that deeply triggers us 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 we notice how we are impacted, we shift our attention away from whatever happened (which is typically outside our control). Instead, we gently invite ourselves to look inside and explore how we feel. We invite ourselves to be present in the here and now, and to become fully aware of how we *experience* what happened. In other words, we invite ourselves to own our experience.

Let's explore a little more what this means.

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

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

While this is easy to say, it is hard to put into practice. Even relatively minor, or just perceived offenses can deeply trigger us. And that is OK. Extending compassion to ourselves does not mean that we don't allow ourselves to be triggered, but rather that we gently invite ourselves to shift our focus from the outside (what happened to us) to the inside (how is it affecting us).

This process of compassionately exploring how we experience the situation starts with **first acknowledging how we feel**. What are the feelings we are experiencing? Do we 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 our awareness may be anger, we 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 of remaining disconnected from what is really going on. In fact, the “voice in the head” is not able to articulate what we 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. Without this grounding, compassion remains disconnected from the authenticity of our experience and lacks the anchoring necessary to make it real.

Once we can acknowledge our feelings, we can move a step further and **allow ourselves 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 once on a night flight sitting next to a mother with a crying baby. When I noticed my growing irritation, I felt ashamed of having such feelings towards a mother with her baby. The self-judgment of how we do feel compared to how we think we should feel holds us to unrealistic standards and can therefore trap us 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 ourselves to feel what we feel” is not to judge our feelings, and not to push them away, regardless of whether we believe those feelings to be appropriate or regardless of how uncomfortable they may be. This includes *all* our feelings, including the feelings of judgment, shame and guilt that may arise.

“Allowing our feelings” does not mean that we give ourselves permission to act out our negative feelings or to lash out to others. It rather means that we give ourselves permission to feel the way we feel, without need to judge, to flee, or to act.

Allowing ourselves to experience the emotions we are having opens the door to eventually **accepting our feelings**: we do not need to change how we feel or suppress it. Experiencing these emotions does not make us “good” or “bad”. It is only natural that we feel this way, and it is OK that we are experiencing what we feel. After all, we are only human, and the fact that we feel what we feel shows our 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 our awareness, and so that it loses some of its grip. We "are" no longer angry, but we now hold an angry feeling. We "are" no longer sad, but we 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 we are trapped in self-pity, the feelings of victimhood have us in their grip and completely overshadow us and cloud our mind and spirit. By contrast, when we extend compassion to ourselves, we can allow the feeling to be there without being defined by it. We can take a step back and observe ourselves in the moment experiencing what we feel.

We own the feeling. The feeling does not own us.

From that point of spaciousness and compassion, **gratitude** can arise, even in the face of very difficult situations. We can be grateful that we can be aware of what we are feeling, for the compassion that comes naturally with the awareness, and even for the feelings themselves. It may be challenging, but when we 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 us towards depression or anger (which is often the path where self-pity leads us), we can sense a lightness settling in.

In this lightness, we can discover and sense that the Self – the “I” who is aware of the feeling – is not only not triggered but is beyond triggering. We sense the continuity of our true Self, regardless of what happens in our circumstances or how they affect us. We can sense that, no matter what happened, our true Self remains unaffected and secure, is love and loved, and supports our agency to take the appropriate action the situation calls for. We sense that **nothing can alter this fundamental reality**.

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