

Practising Self-Compassion at This Challenging Time

For me, one of the worst aspects of the current lockdown has been not knowing when it will end. One of the highlights of my weekly life before the lockdown was teaching Tai Chi four times a week. All of a sudden, that joyful activity has disappeared and I have no way of knowing when I will be able to resume teaching all of my classes.

This not knowing has definitely raised my anxiety levels at times. I am also really missing physical contact with my close friends. Lastly, I am so sad that our Easter visit to Assisi – my favourite place in the world – was cancelled and I have no idea whether our September visit to Assisi will now go ahead. (Of course I also realise how blessed I am that I and my loved ones have stayed well when so many people are sick and even dying from Covid 19)

So, uncertainty about the future is pressing my buttons in this crisis and I am also noticing a tendency to get irritated with those who are responding to the crisis in a different way to me. For example, I am going out for long walks along the River Mersey every day and I am not that bothered about runners or cyclists rushing past me on the path without being over 2 metres away from me. My view is that the risk of catching this virus from a passing runner in an outdoor space is virtually nil. But I have found that not everyone shares my point of view.

The other day for example, I was on one path and a man on a path near me for some reason asked me if I was lost. I said no I was fine and wasn't it a lovely day and he said. 'Yes, but there are so many idiots around who are not keeping a social distance on this path.' I did not want to get into any kind of argument with him, and so I just said something like, 'Oh dear!' and moved on. But inside, I was definitely feeling a bit irritated by him.

By the way, I am definitely not saying that my more lax version of social distancing when out in nature is right and anyone who wants tighter social distancing is wrong. No! I am simply saying that in scary times, we all tend to get more irritated with others, particularly those who do not closely share our perspective on how to transcend the scary situation in which we find ourselves.

The thing is: no-one has a firm grip on what to do about this pandemic. Top epidemiologists, doctors, scientists, economists and politicians are all stumbling around in the total dark desperately trying to find out what will work to save lives. But none of us feels comfortable with this incredible level of uncertainty and so we all tend to get extra frustrated, annoyed or frightened at times by the daily stream of bad news pouring into our homes.

By the way, if you do notice that you are feeling particularly anxious or angry at some point during this long crisis, please reassure yourself that this is absolutely not your fault! Our biological brain is just doing its thing in an attempt to protect us from any kind of external threat. On the other hand if you are really enjoying the extra peace and quiet and down time, please do not feel at all guilty about it. Guilt is actually a really toxic emotion and in any case feeling guilty about having a good time whilst others may be suffering will not diminish their pain at all.

But let me get to the main point here. Is there a way that we can learn to deal with this frightening situation in a way that decreases rather than increases our discomfort?

Fortunately, Gloria and I have recently been doing some brilliant online training with The Mindfulness Association UK, and this training has helped me to focus on a wonderfully

helpful strategy for dealing with all the emotions that are arising up in me during this extremely challenging and uncertain time for all of us.

Without mind training, we will automatically try to push away any uncomfortable feelings. However, doing this tends to trap us in an internal battle that simply increases our level of discomfort.

But I know - and this knowing has been reinforced by all my current online mindfulness training - that the best approach to anxiety or irritation rising up within me is to simply allow those anxious sensations to be there and then to bathe them in some kind of compassionate energy or compassionate awareness.

So a key practice that I want to share with you this month is a 'compassion' practice in which we sit quietly and mindfully for a while, notice how we are feeling moment to moment, allow all those feelings to be there, and then bathe them in compassionate awareness. Let me outline the key steps of this meditation in case you want to try it out for yourself.

Self-Compassion Practice

First of all, sit comfortably with a straight spine but relaxed shoulders. Now feel the connection between your body and the seat and ground underneath you.

Take some slow, deep, mindful breaths for a minute or two.

Next, gently turn your attention to how you are feeling, and in particular, notice how your body is feeling right now.

As you do this, you might notice anxious or angry thoughts or feelings rising up in our system. Don't worry about these thoughts or feelings. Simply allow all your feelings to be there, whether you experience them as pleasant or unpleasant.

If you become aware of any particular discomfort, tension or pain in your body, try your best not to fight against it. Just see if you can soften around the tension or discomfort with your next relaxing out-breath.

Next, place one hand or both hands gently around your heart in a soothing gesture and begin to bathe yourself in the energy of unconditional self-compassion.

Sit for a few minutes – or longer - simply relaxing into this lovely energy.

At the end of this meditation you may like to spend a minute or two extending the energy of compassion to your friends and loved ones, particularly anyone having a really difficult time at the moment.

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Now you may wonder how *exactly* do you do bathe yourself in the life-supporting energy of self-compassion? Well, you need to find a particular way that works well for you. I like to gently place both my palms over my physical heart whilst I silently say something kind and compassionate to myself such as, 'It is OK sweetheart. Everything is going to work out fine in the long run.' or 'Just relax. I have got your back!' But you don't need to be this wordy! You might like to say something really simple to yourself such as, 'It's OK'. Or you might say something to yourself that you would say to a dear friend who needed some TLC.

By the way, if you do not feel comfortable putting your hands over your heart to represent a gesture of self-compassion, you may like to squeeze your hands together in your lap, touch your cheek with a kind, gentle touch or find another compassionate gesture that feels right to you.

The exact method you use for bringing a compassionate awareness to your own suffering really does not matter that much. The key thing is to keep practising accepting whatever you are feeling and then bathing yourself in compassion – particularly whenever you notice any uncomfortable feeling rising up in you until this becomes an ingrained habit.

If you are not used to being kind and compassionate to yourself, you may notice a thought popping into your mind that cultivating self-compassion is self-indulgent, silly or pointless. But I can promise you that becoming much more compassionate toward myself has been a really important aspect of my journey from being miserable and neurotic most of the time to becoming much more at peace with myself. It has also played a key role in enabling me to respond more compassionately to the suffering of others, because we can only ever give out something that we already have ourselves!

Now, I do have to warn you that doing a self-compassion practice once or twice or even 100 times is not going to make all your anxiety or irritation disappear forever. That is not how we human beings work. Feelings of anxiety, irritation, guilt or depression are still going to pop up in your system on a more or less daily basis and you will have no way of stopping this automatic biological process. However, from my own experience of many years of attempting to cultivate unconditional compassion for myself and others, I can assure you that each time you commit to holding any uncomfortable feeling in compassionate awareness, you will take another small step towards living a much more peaceful and radiant life.

If you would like to find out more about the wonderful practice of cultivating self-compassion I recommend the following two books:

Kristin Neff, Self-Compassion

Tara Brach, Radical Acceptance

Alternatively you might like to explore The Mindfulness Association UK website.

Peggy Foster

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