

Countering Compassion Fatigue

Compassion

Meditation

5 min

Practitioner

No

While compassion is the desire for others to be at ease and free from suffering, self-compassion is the ability to acknowledge our pain without resistance and to soothe and comfort ourselves at times of suffering.

Compassion is at the cornerstone of sound therapy. In sharing clients' suffering, therapists express compassion that, in turn, strengthens and comforts the suffering client. While compassion must remain deeply embedded in therapy, there is a clear cost to it in the form of compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue (CF) is the reduction in capacity or interest in extending compassion to one's client after witnessing his or her suffering (Raab, 2014). CF, also known as secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma, is a form of burnout. Unsurprisingly, CF among caregivers has been associated with less effective delivery of care (Shanafelt et al., 2002).

A growing body of research has shown that self-compassion among healthcare professionals is conducive to wellbeing. Specifically, self-compassion has been strongly and positively associated with resilience and better sleep and negatively associated with emotion regulation difficulties and stress symptoms in trainees and practicing health professionals (Finlay-Jones et al., 2015; Kemper et al., 2015). Conversely, therapists who lack self-compassion and who are self-critical are more critical of patients and have poorer client outcomes (Henry, Schacht, & Strupp, 1990).

Mindfulness interventions, particularly those with an added loving-kindness component, have the potential to increase self-compassion among health care professionals.



Author

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Goal

This tool was developed for therapists who give compassion to others more readily than to themselves and, as such, are at risk of compassion fatigue, a form of burnout. It cultivates their self-compassion while maintaining a connection with others.



Advice

- While this tool was developed primarily for health care professionals, some clients may also find it useful, mainly if they are caregivers in their personal or professional lives.
- Users should be aware of holding positive beliefs about the benefits of self-criticism and negative beliefs about the downsides of self-compassion, which will create barriers to building self-compassion.



References

- Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). A pilot study and randomized controlled trial of the mindful self-compassion program. *Journal of clinical psychology, 69*, 28-44.
- Raab, K. (2014). Mindfulness, self-compassion, and empathy among health care professionals: A review of the literature. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy, 20*(3), 95-108.
- Shanafelt, T. D., Bradley, K. A., Wipf, J. E., & Back, A. L. (2002). Burnout and self-reported patient care in an internal medicine residency program. *Family Journal, 12*, 396-400.



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Instructions

- Find a comfortable position, either sitting or lying down. Gently close your eyes and take a few moments to settle in position. Let go of the day so far ... conversations you've had, things you've done ... and just stay in the moment.
- Now, place one of your hands over your heart. Placing your hand there during this meditation serves as a reminder to extend loving awareness to your experience and yourself.

Savor the breath

- Now, take five or so deep, slow breaths. As you breathe, feel the sense of contact between your hand and your chest and notice how your breath nourishes your body on the inhale and soothes your body on the exhale. [30 secs]
- Gently return your breath to its natural rhythm. Allow yourself to savor the sensation of breathing, following the airflow through the nostrils and down into the lungs and out again. [10 secs]

In for me, out for you

- Now, bring awareness to your *in-breath*, and do your best to breathe in something good for yourself. Whatever you need right now. [30 secs]
- Now, shift your attention to focus on your *out-breath*, and do your best to breathe out something good for someone else. Perhaps think of *a loved one* or *someone who is suffering and needs compassion*. Visualize this person clearly in your mind ... and direct each out-breath towards him or her. [30 secs]
- Now, for the next few breaths, focus on the sensation of breathing compassion in and out ... "In for me ... out for you. One for me ... one for you ..." [20 secs]

In for me

- Now, let go of what the other person may need and gently bring your full attention to yourself. [10 secs]
- Continue to breathe gently and intentionally, directing compassion inward ... "In for me ... out for me ..." [20 secs]
- Allow yourself to savor the experience of self-compassion flowing into and out of your body. [20 secs]
- Spend as long as you like here ... "In for me ... out for me ..." and then when are you ready, gently open your eyes.