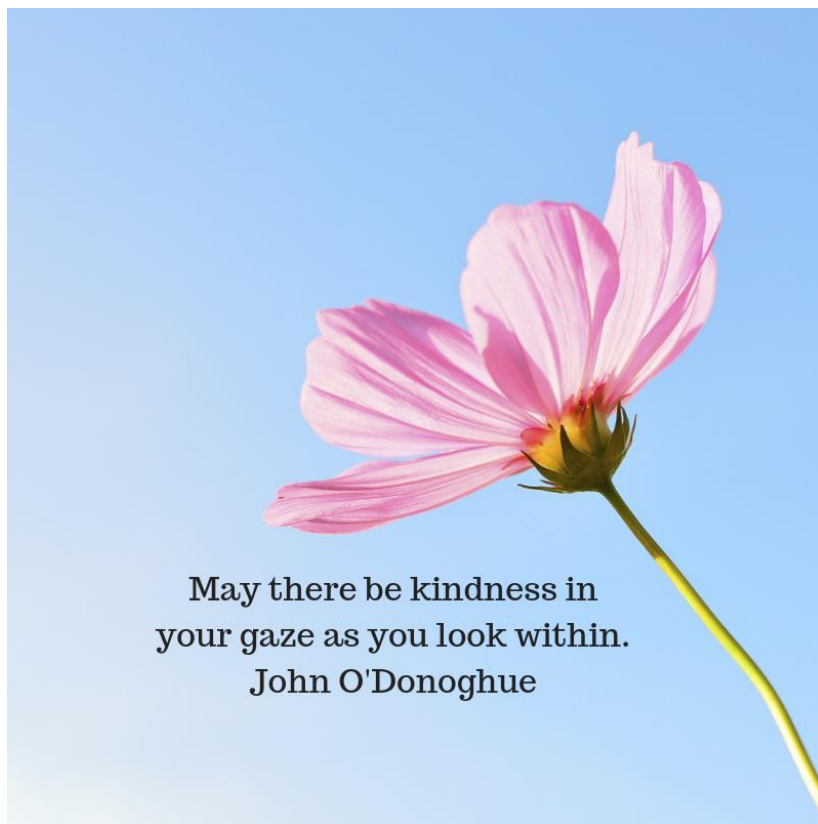


Compassion



May there be kindness in
your gaze as you look within.
John O'Donoghue

The definition of compassion is the ability to understand the emotional state of another person or oneself and the desire to help the person who is suffering.

Self-compassion isn't about liking yourself when you become a better person, self compassion is about liking yourself as you are.

It is befriending yourself now Not when you're perfect, or when you're a size 10, or no longer.....it's becoming a friend to yourself now.

Compassion literally frees us from reacting to things, to people to triggers from the past. It helps us to understand and heal the past, to be present fully in this moment (where life takes places) and it allows us to create the life that we've always wanted. Free to live life how we want, in a state of love without judgement. Sounds good doesn't it! The good news is, anyone can achieve it. Absolutely anyone no matter what your religion, creed, beliefs are, everyone has access to this state all you need to learn is how to get there.

Dr Kristin Neff PhD, is an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin has found:

1. Self-compassionate people ruminate less. In other words they are less likely to keep repeating and repeating negative thoughts to themselves.
2. People who are compassionate towards themselves have lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress.
3. Self-compassionate people feel less negative about the past even though they are more likely to take personal responsibility for what has gone wrong in the past.
4. When self-compassionate people fail, they are more likely try again. This might be because they know that if they fail again they won't subject themselves to fierce criticism.
5. Self-compassionate people are more likely to stick to their diets, to exercise and to succeed in reducing alcohol use. Why this should be is not entirely clear but it may be that a self-compassionate motivation is more helpful than a self-critical one.

You can train yourself to be more compassionate

- 1) It's a skill. It can be learnt and practiced, and like going to the gym, the more that you practice it the better you will become at it and the easier it will be. Compassion helps you to support yourself, accept yourself as you are, encourage yourself to do better next time and it helps you to deal with life and failure. It gives you better coping skills and when you really open your heart to yourself you can give to others in a much more selfless and meaningful way.
- 2) The brain is plastic! That is, the brain is malleable and not fixed as once thought and the scientists have shown that regular compassion based mindfulness practice changes the structure of the brain! fMRIS's show that within minutes of starting the Metta Bhavana (Loving Kindness meditation), there is activity in the Insula, the part

of the brain responsible for our sense of human connectedness and empathy. The Metta Bhavana not only strengthens the insula, it also helps it to grow and expand.

- 3) You already have a natural resource of compassion within. It's there already, its just the blocks that need to be removed.
- 4) You will become more motivated and take more responsibility for our lives and you will persist with goals, dreams and wishes

The scientific research to back this up:

We are all born with a certain level of compassion however, it has been scientifically proven that you can train yourself to be more compassionate! One study was the first to use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to indicate that positive emotions such as loving-kindness and compassion can be learned in the same way as playing a musical instrument or being proficient in a sport.

"People are not just stuck at their respective set points," Prof Davidson says. "We can take advantage of our brain's plasticity and train it to enhance these qualities."

"The capacity to cultivate compassion, which involves regulating thoughts and emotions, may also be useful for preventing depression in people who are susceptible to it." Lutz adds.

"Thinking about other people's suffering and not just your own helps to put everything in perspective," he says, adding that learning compassion for oneself is a critical first step in compassion meditation.

How do you cultivate compassion?

There are a number of ways in which you can train yourself to be more compassionate to both yourself and others

How?

Kristen Neff, a leading researcher on compassion says that there are several components to compassion, they are to:

- 1) Treat yourself with kindness
- 2) Be proactively motivated to help yourself.
- 3) Be aware of common humanity, that is, that we are all human, we are all imperfect and we all lead imperfect lives. When we can really accept this; that we are flawed and we will get things wrong and we will fail then we become more resilient and confident.
- 4) Practice mindfulness as it's the foundation upon which to build self-compassion. We need courage and presence to be with ourselves in the moment and mindfulness teaches us how to do so.

We normally listen to the voice to self-criticism (also known as the inner critic), this voice tells us what we didn't do right, what we got wrong, what we should be embarrassed about

– i.e. it shames and blames us. Self-compassion is the antidote to this voice and what's great is that it's a **portable** therapy that we can use at any time. Here is simple strategy for bringing compassion into your everyday life:

- 1) When you become aware of a tough moment, acknowledge it. *"This is really hard"* *"I'm struggling with this"* This validates your feeling.
- 2) Remind yourself of common humanity. This is part of what it is to be human, everyone experiences this and I am not alone. This is a part of life.
- 3) Bring some words of kindness to yourself. Talk to yourself as you would to a friend if they were struggling in this way. Use soft warm tones.

This simple strategy gives you an opportunity to transform a moment of suffering into a moment of kindness and love.

Mindfulness

This is a vital component of compassion, it gives us the foundations upon which to build compassion. Everything that we do in mindfulness is full of compassion, from how we bring our attention back to the moment when it wanders, to deep appreciation of our body to giving ourselves permission to have emotions. You cannot practice mindfulness without also being practicing compassion.

Metta Bhavana or Loving Kindness Meditation

A mindfulness meditation this is one of the most effective ways to practice compassion. Brain research has shown that within minutes of starting the Metta Bhavana, there is activity in the Insula, the part of the brain responsible for our sense of human connectedness and empathy. Empathy allows you to see and understand each other, compassion develops and we realise that we're all having the same experience on this planet. We all have different struggles and challenges but ultimately we are all here together and we're all the same. We are all connected in a common humanity. The metta bhavana removes the illusion that we are truly separate and alone.

Located deep inside your grey matter, the insula also informs you of what's happening in the present moment without connecting the experience to a specific emotion. When you're thinking this way, a traffic jam doesn't seem like a problem; it's simply a bunch of cars on the road.

During this practice we focus our words of compassion first on ourselves, then on a good friend (you can use an animal either), a neutral person (which may be difficult as it can be hard to find someone for whom we have no instantaneous judgement, a difficult person and then everyone together.

"If someone comes along and shoots an arrow into your heart, it's fruitless to stand there and yell at the person. It would be much better to turn your attention to the fact that there's

an arrow in your heart...” Pema Chödrön, Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living

The Metta Bhavana not only strengthens the insula, it also helps it to grow and expand.

1. If you want to improve your relationship with yourself, practise the Metta Bhavana
2. If you want to improve your self-esteem and self-compassion, practise the Metta Bhavana
3. If you want to improve your relationships, practise the Metta Bhavana

The first stage of the metta bhavana or loving kindness meditation is to extend compassion to ourselves with the phrase “may I be well, May I be happy, may I be at peace” For some people this might be a real challenge. If this is the case and you’re feeling this way, then you can start with extending compassion to a pet (even if they’re passed away) , giving your metta to an innocent being like a pet can feel very safe and a natural place to start. “May tiger be well, may tiger be happy, may tiger be at peace” Over time then, when it feels right, you can include yourself. “may tiger and I be well, may tiger and I be happy, may tiger and I be at peace.”

This is where we will start with our meditation today

May you be well, happy and at peace

Ellen

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