

# **self-compassion, self-encouragement** **& strengthening attachment security**

*all research & website links are given in the [www.stressedtozest.com](http://www.stressedtozest.com) march '11 blog post of this handout*

Research suggests that self-compassion may be as much as ten times more relevant than mindfulness for improvements in anxiety, depression & quality of life (Van Dam, Sheppard et al. 2011), although the two concepts (self-compassion & mindfulness) overlap to a great extent (Baer, Smith et al. 2008; Kuyken, Watkins et al. 2010). Self-compassion for ourselves and empathy for others are powerful contributors to wellbeing – and both are deeply interlinked with the security or insecurity of our "attachment" in important close relationships both now and earlier in our lives (Wei, Liao et al. 2011). On 6<sup>th</sup> March 2011, I wrote a post "*Behavioural systems (attachment, care giving, exploration, sex & power): hyperactivated, hypo-activated or just about right?*" and then on 13<sup>th</sup> March "*Behavioural systems (attachment, care giving, exploration, sex & power): using imagery & compassion to fine tune them*". In the latter I described research showing both that there are a whole series of ways to strengthen a sense of attachment security in adults, and that repeated (rather than once off) use of these methods tends to lead to more lasting positive changes. Increasing attachment security has important benefits for how we relate to other people (e.g. increased empathy, cooperation & kindness) and for how we relate to ourselves (e.g. reduced risk of anxiety & depression, and increased resilience, authenticity & self-compassion). Remember this "secure attachment priming" is likely to work best if it's done repeatedly over an extended period of time. It's like strengthening a muscle through exercise – it takes work & repetition. We produce actual physical changes in the brain that are already measurable after a few weeks' regular meditation practice (Holzel, Carmody et al. 2011) and become more pronounced with continued training (Lazar, Kerr et al. 2005). So here are a dozen suggestions for building self-compassion. Experiment & feel free to be creative. Sense what seems to work best for you – then stay with it, at least for a while. There are so many benefits both for ourselves and for others when we are more self-compassionate.

**1.) remember loving people from your past:** Who earlier in your life was loving and supportive to you? Who was most important for you in providing reassurance & encouragement? Maybe one or both of your parents? Maybe another member of your family or relative? Maybe a teacher, a good boss, or an old friend? Remembering key people from our past and the positive things they said to us, how they looked, the tone of their voice, maybe their touch – these can all be powerfully reassuring and settling for us when we're feelings threatened, demoralised, self-critical or anxious.

**2.) remember loving people from your present:** And how about people in your life now? Do you have friends or a partner or others you know, who are particularly good at helping you feel settled and reassured when you're feeling flustered or down? Again, visualising them, remembering or imagining what they would say to you, how they would reassure you and care for you, their voice tone and kind facial expression. Maybe link to a particular memory. Explore who and what is most helpful for you.

**3.) think of inspiring spiritual teachers:** Are you a spiritual person? Are there particular religious or spiritual teachers who touch you, who really matter to you? Are there specific things that they've said that help you to feel safe, loved, reassured, held? Again it may be helpful to link to memories, images, tones of voice, words.

**4.) think of one's own inner 'friend', 'parent', or 'wise aspect':** We are often much better at empathising with, supporting and advising our friends than we are for ourselves! Getting perspective on our situation by imagining what one would feel and say for a friend going through difficulties like ours can be helpful (see the handout "*Getting a better perspective*" for more ideas about this). Imagine an 'inner friend', a 'wise' part of ourselves – that can support us, reassure us, help and encourage us.

**5.) use photographs, symbols & other tangible links:** Women undergoing a painful procedure experienced less pain if they looked at a photograph of their partner (Master, Eisenberger et al. 2009) – in this research study, looking at a photograph reduced pain even better than holding their partner's hand. In further research (Dal Cin, MacDonald et al. 2006), wearing a reminder bracelet doubled the rate that participants followed through on their intentions at six weeks follow-up, compared with a **[cont.]**

group who had intended to act but hadn't been given any physical reminder to wear. Photographs of those who particularly love and support us, physical reminders, religious symbols – carrying or wearing these links can help us feel cared for and safe.

**6.) use favourite quotations, bible verses, buddhist sayings & inspiring writings:** Maybe you've come across sayings (spiritual or lay) that particularly touch you, that particularly help you to feel peaceful, safe & content. There's research suggesting that it's the experience of contentment & safeness that combats self-criticism, insecure attachment, anxiety & depression more than just feeling other types of relaxed or activated positive emotion (Gilbert, McEwan et al. 2008). Try learning the words to repeat to yourself, maybe try "meditating" on them, maybe write them down and carry them with you.

**7.) write yourself messages on a card you carry, on your phone, or your computer:**

There are several research studies showing important benefits from using this kind of writing (Kelly, Zuroff et al. 2009; Shapira & Mongrain 2010). Typical instructions might involve visualising a "*compassionate image characterized by warmth, acceptance, reassurance, and a desire to soothe distress. This image was also to possess qualities of wisdom, empathy, forgiveness and non-judgment. Participants were asked to spend thirty seconds visualizing this image, focusing on the compassionate other's tone of voice, body language, size, and emotions*" and then to write from the perspective of this compassionate, soothing image "*five statements to themselves ... onto five separate cue cards ... participants were ... told to repeat their compassionate self-statements three times per day (morning, midday, and evening), over the next two weeks, while engaging in compassionate imagery. They were told to spend approximately one minute visualizing their warm, accepting image and up to four minutes reading their self-statements repeatedly out loud with emotion and warmth*". This is basically a three times daily mini-meditation. The handout "*Moods affect us quickly & powerfully*" illustrate that we're potentially doing something pretty powerful here. If we really allow ourselves to feel into, visualise & be emotionally affected by each five minute mini-meditation, then we can produce physical, psychological & biochemical changes that are fully capable of lasting to the next mini-meditation we do a few hours later. Other successful research interventions have used variants on this kind of theme, encouraging participants to try to make the experience vivid and emotion-eliciting.

**8.) use songs & music - to listen to or to sing yourself:** Music has powerful effects on us. In fact research suggests that the primary reason people give for listening to music is to manage/regulate their moods (Lonsdale and North 2011). We know that well-chosen music and lyrics promote empathy and helping behaviours (Greitmeyer 2009) and singing can boost feelings of wellbeing (Grape, Sandgren et al. 2003). See the blog "*Therapeutic use of film, music & poetry*" (posted in September '09) for more about this. What kind of music/lyrics help you feel more at peace? My choices date me – they include the Beatles "*Let it be*", John Lennon's "*Imagine*", Bob Marley's "*One love*" & "*Three little birds*", Farka Toure & Diabate's "*In the heart of the moon*", Newton's "*Amazing grace*"; slow movements of beautiful classical pieces (Beethoven, Bruch, Mendelssohn, Mozart ... ), much sacred music, so many great choices. What works for you? Consider playing them to yourself regularly. Put them on an MP3 player or phone to carry with you. Learn lyrics and sing them to yourself, silently or out loud. Have fun.

**9.) use 'terms of endearment', kind voice tone & touch:** Kristin Neff, in the fourth of her helpful seven "*Exercises to increase self-compassion*" suggests "*... imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you ... it might help to use a term of endearment that strengthens expressed feelings of warmth and care (but only if it feels natural rather than schmaltzy.) ... while engaging in this supportive self-talk, you might want to try gently stroking your arm, or holding your face tenderly in your hands (as long as no one's looking). Physical gestures of warmth can tap into the caregiving system even if you're having trouble calling up emotions of kindness at first, releasing oxytocin that will help change your bio-chemistry. The important thing is that you start acting kindly, and feelings of true warmth and caring will eventually follow.*" The "terms of endearment" interests me particularly. Have people important to you in your life called you by a loving nickname. Are there gentle, caring names/words you use talking to those you particularly care about. Could you try using the nickname, the caring names/words sometimes when you're internally encouraging yourself. I find myself doing this spontaneously – it helps to soothe, warm, encourage & even amuse me!

**10.) link with relaxation, mindfulness & embodied cognition:** The handouts "*Embodied cognition: posture & feelings*" & "*Embodied cognition: what to do*" look at how our body position [**cont.**]

facial expression and movement all affect our internal biochemistry and how we think, feel & act. We have choices here. How would we sit, stand, move if we were feeling more at peace with ourselves, gentler with ourselves, happier with ourselves? Why wait!? Our bodies are always with us – start now. And we can return regularly to this as an act of mindfulness & applied relaxation throughout our day.

**11.) use the ideas at regular times - meditations, at meal times, with reminder dots, on waking & on going to sleep:** Try setting up little "reminders" that will help you to link to brief moments of self-compassion & self-encouragement throughout the day. One way of doing this is to have a short sequence you use. For example you might consciously take a few slightly slower fuller breaths, relax, come into the present, and gently repeat a few words or phrases that nourish self-kindness/self-encouragement. I typically suggest that, if someone was watching you, they wouldn't even notice that you were doing this exercise. You don't have to stop what you're doing ... it's a quiet internal process you touch into. You could link this to particular reminder activities e.g. every time you wash, every time you hear a phone, every time you open the fridge door, and so on. Be creative. Change it around from week to week. Have fun. A slightly more "formal" way of doing this is to use reminder dots. These can be the little stick-on dots you can buy at a stationers, or small bits of blu-tack. Position them around your environment, on your phone, your watchstrap, your purse or wallet, and so on. The aim is to "bump into" a reminder dot many times during your day. When you see a dot, you don't have to stop what you're doing, but you gently use your brief breath/relaxation/self-compassion exercise. There is a fuller description of how to use reminder exercises like this at "*Autogenic Training class 6 description*" in the "*Good knowledge*" section of the [www.stressedtozest.com](http://www.stressedtozest.com) website.

**12.) combine methods & link with implementation intentions:** Best of all, combine different methods. So the five self-compassionate messages you wrote on a card (suggestion 7), could easily be messages some of which you repeat to yourself at the reminder dot or specific activity triggered mini-exercises that you do throughout the day (suggestion 11). Ideas from "*embodied cognition*" (suggestion 10) link well with almost all of the other suggestions. Noticing symbols or reminder links you carry or wear (suggestion 5) could be used to encourage you to remember quotations, inspiring verses or sayings that you're finding helpful (suggestion 6), or to remember & visualise loving figures from your present or past, or religious teachers, or linking with an inner friend or wise, nurturing part of ourselves (suggestions 1 to 4). Play with these ideas. It may well be helpful to deliberately set some up as "*Implementation intentions*" (see handout), a method designed to help us stay on course when the going gets tough.

For other ideas on nourishing self-compassion see, for example, Paul Gilbert's work and the excellent "*Compassionate mind foundation*" website, Stanford University's "*Center for compassion & altruism research*" and Kristin Neff's "*Self-compassion*" website. You can check on the progress you're making by seeing how your scores change on the short self-compassion scale. The simple "*4 item scale*" for self-criticism & self-compassion provides an even quicker "thermometer of progress".

And note too that care-seeking/attachment is just one of several behavioural systems. A toddler, who has been frightened and who comes running to mother, doesn't then stay with mother. If the attachment system is secure & working well, the toddler gets a hug & reassurance – then they're squirming to be off again to play & explore the world. See handouts on "*Behavioural systems (attachment, care giving, exploration, sex & power)*" for more on this. I hope these twelve suggestions for boosting secure attachment & self-compassion have been of use for you. Self-compassion is just the start, the spring-board, that one can repeatedly revisit. From there we move out particularly to care giving and exploration.

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