

Mindful Self-compassion

– the key to emotional resilience

by Barry Lee

I'll start by acknowledging that the word "self-compassion" can sometimes be off putting for some people. If you feel this way, please keep reading. I can relate! Fifteen years ago, I was working as a newly qualified solicitor in a corporate law firm. It was a difficult time for me. There was a lot of work-related stress in my life and I was suffering with anxiety and panic attacks. Often, it felt like I was struggling to get through the day. I needed help. Still, reflecting back on this time, what do I think my younger self would say if someone told him, "Barry, I can see that you are struggling, you should really consider learning about self-compassion"?

Being honest, I can see my younger self scoffing and rolling his eyes at the idea of it: "Self-compassion!?"

In fact, it was exactly what I needed. At the time, I just didn't know any better.

Whenever I teach this practice, I always start by asking clients to reflect on any misgivings they might have about practicing self-compassion, as there are often some common misconceptions.

Do you notice any of the following reactions as you read this?

- It is weak
- It is self-indulgent
- It will undermine my motivation to get things done
- It is a form of making excuses
- It is like self-pity

It might be interesting to know that none of the above are true. Self-compassion is actually the key to

resilience, strength in the face of failure and the ability to learn from mistakes.

There is a significant body of evidence showing that practicing self-compassion is strongly correlated with increased emotional resilience and well-being, in addition to reduced stress and anxiety (Stanford Medicine – Scientific Benefits of Self-Compassion).

A common trait shared by many of us is a tendency towards being very harsh and critical of ourselves. This is not a good thing. Research shows that self-criticism actually makes us weaker in the face of failure, more emotional, and less likely to assimilate lessons from our failures.

Let me share a story with you which might illustrate how unhelpful this tendency towards self-criticism can be...

I remember as a young lawyer once making a mistake at a completion meeting. I made plenty of mistakes over the years by the way, this is just one of

them! The meeting was going fine but as we were nearing the end, I realised that I had forgotten an important document.

My heart sank. I spent a few minutes frantically looking for it, but it wasn't there. I felt everyone staring at me. Looking back, of course it wasn't the end of the world but at the time, it felt like it was. I apologised to everyone at the meeting, but I sensed some frustration and impatience in the room. I was by far the most inexperienced lawyer there and I was holding up the show.

Both sets of clients were there too. I had to walk a short distance back to my office to get the document, while everyone waited around. I remember on that walk back, feeling physically sick. My face was hot. I was sweating.

I remember cursing myself and telling myself that everyone must think I'm an idiot. I wanted to disappear. The rest of the meeting was a blur. That night in

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bed, it was all I could think about. I was trapped in a spiral of rumination, imagining multiple worst-case scenarios. It took me a long time to recover, and my confidence was badly rocked.

At the next completion meeting (and the one after that) I remembered all the documents, but it was an awful experience because I was so nervous. I was flustered instead of calm. I couldn't think clearly because I was paralysed by the fear of making another mistake. It's obviously important to check that you have everything before going to a completion meeting. My old boss used to say, "measure twice and cut once". It's good advice and that was the lesson to be learned from my experience, but I was now bordering on OCD. I know that I didn't perform as well as I could have and I'm sure my nervousness was palpable.

In this example, my natural tendency towards self-criticism was really unhelpful and caused me a LOT of unnecessary stress and anxiety. If my colleague forgot a document, I would never in a million years have treated him or her the way I treated myself.

I wouldn't have reminded him about his mistake last thing at night and first thing in the morning. If I had known about self-compassion at the time, I might have paused and responded with some kindness and encouragement. I know I would have bounced back more quickly, and I would have been much better at my job too.

So, what exactly is self-compassion and how do I practice it?

Compassion arises "when kindness meets suffering".

In case you are put off by the word "suffering" it is important to note that we all suffer at times... we might feel stressed or anxious, we might experience conflict with another person, we might make a mistake, we might feel overwhelmed, or we might encounter physical pain.

It isn't enough to simply acknowledge that there is suffering. For compassion to arise there must also be the sincere wish (at some level) to alleviate that suffering - kindness meets suffering.



It is a very human quality we all share. We usually experience compassion in the heart as an open, warm, spacious feeling.

There are three ingredients to self-compassion (mindfulness, common humanity and kindness). A simple practice which integrates each component is the three step self-compassion break, developed by Dr Kristen Neff (one of the pioneers of Mindful Self Compassion) and it goes like this:

Step 1 (Mindfulness)

"This is a moment of suffering"... first we must actually connect with the difficult experience without over-identifying with it or drowning in it. This is counter intuitive, and it takes some courage. Normally when a difficult experience arises, our first instinct is to recoil and contract. Mindfulness means being aware of our present moment experience "as it is". It gives us perspective. We can witness the physical sensations that go along with this difficult experience coming and going... the tension, the resistance, the contraction.

We acknowledge the difficult experience but don't have to over-identify with it and get lost in a spin cycle of thought. Mindfulness creates a little distance and gives us space to breathe.

Step 2 (Common Humanity) -

"Suffering is part of life"... next we acknowledge that this difficult experience is part of an authentic human life. We are not alone in this. Even on my very worst day, I know that millions of others feel the same.

Sometimes people forget documents! Recognising this truth takes the magnifying glass off me and my experience. Again, acknowledging the common humanity of suffering gives us perspective. This is just part of life. It's normal to feel anxious, angry, overwhelmed, frustrated, embarrassed or sad at times. We all make mistakes, and we all fall short. I'm not alone and I don't have to beat myself up.

Step 3 (Kindness)

"In the midst of all this, without having to fix everything, can I be kind to myself?"... for the final step we offer ourselves some kindness. It is probably easy to do this for a good friend but perhaps not so easy to do this for yourself?

Think for a moment about what you might say to a good friend who is going through this same difficult experience. Imagine that they are struggling right now. What is your facial expression as you sit with them? What is the tone of your voice? Are you rolling your eyes and telling them that it's all their fault? Are you getting up to leave the room? Are you telling them all about the worst-case scenario? Are you going to kick them while they are down? If you are not having a really bad day yourself, probably not. Without having to fix everything, in your better moments you might be able to offer your good friend some kindness and support.

Now, without it feeling phony, can you offer some of this same kindness to yourself? What words do you need to hear?... "this will pass", "it will be ok", "I'm doing the best I can", "I'm not alone", "This is hard but I know I can be with this experience and I know I can learn from it" What would actually help right now? Maybe you can simply return your attention to the connection between your feet and the floor. There may be a sense of support there? Can you release some tension in the body or perhaps allow the breath to slow and deepen? Even one deep breath?

So that's the practice. It's very simple but it's not always easy.

If it resonates with you and you would like to learn more, please feel free to contact me and I will be happy to chat!



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Barry Lee is the chairperson of the Mindfulness Teachers Association of Ireland and has practiced mindfulness for 15 years. He worked as a corporate lawyer for 10 years and now teaches evidence-based mindfulness and self-compassion programmes in organisations and for the general public.



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