

Using Compassion to Change our Minds

In helping people work with distressing thoughts, feelings and behaviours, compassion focused approaches, and compassionate mind training or CMT, follows a fairly other focused therapies in some ways. For example one might help people to identify triggering events, explore current feelings and the meanings, thoughts and coping (safety strategies) associated with them. However, compassionate mind work also varies in a number of ways.

1. CMT suggests that negative automatic thoughts are related to threat focused automatic reactions. For thoughts associated with negative moods CMT distinguishes between *external* and *internal* threats. External threats are what the world/or people in it will do to the self; internal threats are related to thoughts and feelings that arise within the self. People can of course then worry that they will be criticised or shamed for those internal reactions. Thus, assessments and focus will reflect this.
2. Not only can people feel frightened by the emergence of powerful feelings/intrusion/fantasies, but they can experience their own self-evaluations in a frightening way. Thus in CMT we focus on the emotions that can be generated within (say) a self-critical or self-attacking sequence. The consequences of feeling attacked by one's own negative thoughts may be to feel beaten down. So, CMT spends time exploring the **emotions of the self-attack**, e.g., frustration, anger, disappointment or aggressive or submissive contempt. In other words what emotional tone are we engaged in when self-attacking and directing at ourselves; how to we actually hear and sense the self put-downs in our minds. The person can be asked to imagine the self-attacking part as if it were a person, "What would it look like?", "What emotions would it be directing at you?" This can help people recognise the power of their self-critical side.

We also explore functions origins of self-criticism

Functions of the self-attacking. Therapists might address this. With the following

We can generate various thoughts and feelings about ourselves some of which can be quite critical and harsh ways. As we have discussed this can lead to more distress (therapist will have explore this in detail) so we can think together about what keeps this style going for you. Lets look at the advantages and disadvantages of your self-criticism. [also ask: where would your self-criticism ideally lead you or make you into? What might be your greatest fear in giving up self criticism - and explore the inference chin of that; what might others gain form you staying self critical)

Possible *origins* of the self-attacking style and why people continue *submit/agree* with it and why (e.g. habit, or fear based).

When did you start to become self-critical and what was happening in your life? Whose voice it that stated the process going? What would have been you greatest fear in standing up to that critical other or voice in your head. What would it take now to stop agreeing with it. [all the time you are exploring for the fear of giving up self-criticisms because self-criticism is commonly a safety strategy. You can look at the credentials of the critic (e.g., write down their core qualities) – do they have one’s best loving interests at heart?].

3. CMT also helps people recognise self-attacking as a component of their *threat* systems. Commonly when people become threatened about making mistakes or being shamed, there is a kind of inner panic and frustration which becomes weaved into a self-attacking focus. Sometimes however, the self-criticism is a memory of being attacked and one can identify the critical ‘voice’ as the voice of a parent or authority figure. When the person plays this in their mind they may adopt the same submissive postures they did as a child. Either way threat powers the self-attacking system. One can work on that by revisiting the authority, credentials or legitimacy of the critic. This helps to people to see that they often maintain this bullying out of fear of change rather than logic.

The New Emotional Experience

4. Mindfulness approaches work by helping people become better observers and attentive to the flow of their thoughts rather than being rushed along with them. The idea is to change the relationship with thoughts, rather than the thoughts themselves. CMT utilises this approach but suggests that some people will find it easier, at least in the early stages, if they can deliberately re-focus their attention in a compassionate way to be with themselves.
5. Some cognitive based approaches are focussed on trying to generate alternative evidence to counteract negative thoughts. CMT will often do this but focusing on evidence will necessarily be sufficient to help people change. Rather we need to get ‘processing’ from a different emotional source and create a new emotional experience in one’s thinking that counteracts the emotional experience of their frustration, anger or contempt of the self-criticism. Rational and evidence based re-evaluations are useful in so far as they help to do this. Thus all alterative thoughts and behavioural experiments should be conducted with the best emotional tone. This is created by a) explaining to the person the importance of developing a ‘kind supportive and gentle attitude to oneself (take them back to the three circles) and b) practicing this through the breath, imagery and refocusing.

Some first steps

6. The first movement into change is developing *empathy for one's own distress*. This directs the person's attention to why this distress is understandable (though obviously undesirable). This does require understanding rather than just acceptance. Many people have a sense of shame and feeling that they are not coping because of their distress. Empathy for one's distress can take a lot of work therapeutically, but it is key for the person to begin to work with their distress rather than avoid it or explain it away or unhelpful acceptance in the sense of "oh well this is just how I am". Explore how the person thinks and feel when they do this. Empathic understanding can also be extended to self-criticism because we can see it as threat based.
7. CMT will then try to recruit attention, memory, meta-cognitive reasoning, behaviour and *emotion* systems, in the service of being nurturing supportive, kind and caring of oneself. CMT tries to integrate these different elements and focus them all on development of compassion. At all times one is collaborative, trying out new ideas and processes with curiosity and as behavioural experiments. Invite the person to see how they could improve on the process/technique, paying particular attention to what is helpful what is not, what is hard and what helps. In this way you are learning together and learning from the person you are working with. This joint work creates a collaborative atmosphere.

Compassionate attention involves the way in which we focus our minds, what we choose to attend to. The exact focus of attention will be worked out with the person but it may involve a focus on a compassionate image, an object, a smell, a smiling face of someone who was caring, a compassionate memory. Compassionate attention focuses on the sensory modalities. For some people having a mantra of words such as "I wish to be happy and let go my suffering" as one breathe gently can be helpful. Kristin Neff suggests that placing one hand over one's heart whilst repeating one's mantra can be helpful. Sometimes if a person has something they can hold, such as a smooth stone, that is associated with the compassionate orientation, this can be helpful. In some societies people have beads that they ease through there fingers when stressed. Again it is explaining the idea and then inviting the person to explore things for themselves.

Compassionate thinking is related to the process of reasoning and metacognition. It will focus on many cognitive therapy elements such as bringing balance to thinking, de-personalising and de-shaming, developing multi-causal ideas of responsibility, seeing each event as unique rather than over generalising, common humanity thinking (to tackle negative social comparisons). It is a key process in helping to counteract rumination – and at times re-directing ruination to a compassionate focus. When compassionate thinking is fused with compassionate feeling we move towards the position of wisdom.

Wisdom emerges because we have deep insight into the nature of things.

Compassionate behaviour focuses on what people feel would be the most helpful, nurturing, supportive or encouraging thing to do. Actions are important. There needs to be clarity on the distinction between compassionate behaviour and submissiveness. Compassionate behaviour is also more than being 'nice to oneself' it must focus on the quality for growth, development and flourishing. Compassionate behaviour is not the same as immediate self soothing though it may be part of it. Compassionate behaviour can focus on immediate behaviours or on longer-term goals. Sometimes compassionate behaviour is facing up to and doing those things that we are frightened of - such as getting out of an abusive a relationships; or it could be giving up a bad habit (e.g., smoking) – and of course in doing this we focus on the kindness, understanding of how difficult it is and thus our inner supportive voice to carry it through - So it is the behaviour we need to engage with to prosper and grow. Sometime when in a conflict ot upset we just need to take time out an ponder “what is the most helpful and compassionate thing to do” That is not always easy to know and the best of intentions can of course run into unforeseen problems – but the focus on a *compassionate* solution sets the emotional tone.

Compassionate emotion focuses on trying to generate a certain emotional tone in the whole process of change and growth. The emotions that we are interested in are therefore warmth, kindness, gentleness and soothing. Hence when we create thoughts in our mind we deliberately try to make them warm, gentle and soft in tone. This of course does not in any way preclude more excitement emotions and feelings of joy when we succeed or our children succeed at certain things. Joy is a part of compassion too, although probably has more activation in it. The key of the compassionate emotions is that they are focused on well-being and flourishing.

There are many was these aspects can be brought together as in using various 'thought forms' or asking people to take on the roles of “a deeply compassionate person and the think and reason and feel from that point of view, of having an imagery conversation with one inner compassionate image, devaluing a compassionate reframe, or engaging in compassionate letter writing. For each of those 'exercises' one is exploring intently for the compassionate attention, styles of thinking, behaviour and feeling.

Basics for CFT

- Use the evolutionary and neuroscience model to inform your practice
- Share this model with the person you are working with – always come back to the three circles and check this make sense and is helpful.
- Help to offer clear formulations in terms of safety strategies and ‘not your fault’ whilst at the same time harnessing the desire to take responsibility for change. Responsibility taking is more likely when people give up blaming and condemning
- Integrate other of your approaches such as behavioural, cognitive, problem solving, or affect based, in the spirit of developing compassion
- Your key focus will be on developing inner empathy, understanding kindness and warmth – with clear explanations and shared understanding of why this is important.
- Recognise the fear and ambivalence to change (including the fear of becoming self-compassionate and the fear of compassionate feelings); the roles of social factors
- Stay mindful of people’s developmental abilities.