

Compassionate Letter Writing

Therapist Notes

The idea behind compassionate mind letter writing is to help people engage with their problems with a focus on understanding and warmth. We want to try to bring this **emotional system** into helping with the problem. It is from a position of compassionate understanding/feeling that you can then integrate the various cognitive, behavioural and emotional interventions you have decided to use. Focusing on the soothing system helps to reduce the likelihood that alternative thoughts and behaviours are done in a cold or aggressive manner. Also, you are teaching your clients to begin to develop a new type of relationship with themselves. Explain the idea of compassionate letter writing and explore their thoughts about it, so that it is a collaborative exercise and experiment.

You can then use various ideas to try to help people put themselves in a *compassionate frame of mind*. For example, if you have worked on the compassionate ideal-image, and they have various images of that, they can take a few slow breaths, bring the image to mind and then write the letter as from that point of view – e.g., imagine this image talking to them, which they write down. Help the client focus on helpful sensory aspects. Alternatively, the client may imagine their ideal compassionate self – the kind of caring person they would like to be. This is the focus that we will use in the client handout below.

The content of the letter should show clear empathy for distress with phrases such as “it is understandable you feel x because” In other words, you are helping people to write about and be clear about the nature of their distress rather than just self-critical or coldly observant.

Look to see if they can focus on compassionate **attention**, compassionate **thinking** and **compassionate** behaviour. This is how the person brings their

work on generating alternative thoughts, reflecting, and really focusing on those behaviours that are likely to be helpful to them. Compassionate behaviours are not just things such as doing nice things for oneself but need to be focused on the problem at hand. Commonly, this may be focused on help-seeking behaviour learning to be compassionately assertive, or working with fears and/or aversive emotions.

You can write letters in session with them, or you can suggest that you leave the client for five minutes or so and let them write one, or it can be between sessions. When they bring the letter back they can read it to you, trying to put as much warmth in their voice as possible. Also it can be helpful if you read their letters back to them, again speaking slowly and with as much warmth inflection in your voice as you can manage – but this needs to be genuine and not 'sickly or false.' Explore their feelings and the degree to which their alternative thoughts in the letter are believable, acceptable and helpful. It is the emotional shift that is key.

Keep to the spirit of the exercise, rather than getting caught up in technique. Constantly collaborate with your client, which will mean at times going back to the three circles, so that there is clarity as to what together you are trying to achieve. Always invite your client to think how they could improve on the procedures, so that they become their own best guides - and can teach you new ideas!

Below is a client hand-out, which offers some guides for letter writing. When you give this to your client check out that they understand the point and they would find it helpful. Remind them that this is, in part, an experiment and not about doing things, right or wrong. Also note that it may take some practice to get the hang of it but that, of course, is the point. If people are struggling with the *fear* of being compassionate then acknowledge that compassionately, really spend time exploring that fear and the beliefs/trauma experiences associated with it. Go back to the three circles and 'brain storm' how you can move forward and what would be helpful. Sometimes the client will need more compassionate interactions and reflections from you before they can

internalise it enough to be able to develop this attitude to themselves. Keep in mind that avoidance of feelings of warmth can be a form of safety behaviour.

One notes and discusses this in a non-judgemental way helping the person re-focus on compassionate feelings and it is the *feelings* of the letters that are important. So collaboratively one might come up with “This has been an upsetting time for you and your upset is very understandable, especially given things that have happened to you. Humans are upset by things like this and can disturb us (common humanity). You have felt like this before though and shown a lot of courage in getting through it and were pleased you did (redirect attention to strengths in a person). Let’s focus on that courage and what would be helpful to you right now.....”

One explains that tuning into compassion can be difficult which is understandable as people are not used to treating themselves this way but (as in behavioural experiments) let’s see what happens over time as we practice. Although research on the value of this approach is scant at present, in a series of recent studies with students Leary et al., (2007) found that this type of writing can be helpful in dealing with negative life events.

It can also help for the therapist to gently, and with a slow, warm voice, read their letters back to them and see if they have feelings of understanding and warmth via the tones of the therapist. You note that it is their words you are reading and therefore they have the compassionate insights they need.

Working with compassion can often activate strong grief and sadness and people may cry. For some this is very helpful because they are better able to work on their pain (rather than avoid it, getting angry with it or try to bully themselves out it) and this can be followed by feeling more peaceful. For others though these feelings are frightening and any possibility of having sympathy for their own distress, or sadness at how alone they have felt, is felt to be alarming, shaming or vulnerable and they may shut down or even dissociate. Here we note this and return to the three circles and slow down – recognising and discussing the fear of warmth for the self.

Helpful and Unhelpful Letters

Many people will need guidance on compassionate writing because at first the letters can be rather dismissive or cold - so you will be looking out for writing that is and is not helpful. A useful guide is how the person feels on writing, how they feel on reading it (may be a day or two later) – and if you read it to them - how they feel when you read it to them. So you need to check on the *emotional tone* and felt experience. For example a person wrote about a falling out she had had with a friend whom she felt had snubbed her. From her compassionate self she wrote. “Dear X, I am sad you are feeling so upset. This has been an upsetting time for you and your upset is very understandable. However you know you tend to be very black and white about things and this is another example. Maybe you are over reacting

Now while the first couple of sentences felt helpful the “However you know you tend to be very black and white about things and this is another example. Maybe you are over reacting” was felt to be rather condemning and really an appeal to ‘stop making mountains out of mole hills’. This is an invalidation and we learnt from her letter writing that she would often invalidate her feelings – mistaking that as compassion. Thus there was actually a sense of shame for ‘overreacting’ that crept through. Thus it was not at all empathic or warm.

Avoid the letter going off into ‘shoulds, ‘why don’t you’ or advice. Sometimes people will write themselves advice – often good advice but then they have been given advice all their lives and it is not generating it that is the issue but following advice rather than. So the compassion side has to communicate in way that is kind supportive and encouraging. For example “you have felt that if you could learn to tolerate your anxiety a bit more this would help you. Okay lets see if we focus together what would help you. Anxiety is not about you being silly or abnormal - it is that our brains can really cause us problems at times through no fault on our own....”. Avoid the “It would help you if you..... Why don’t you just

Discuss this with the person so they really get the hang of the importance of ‘felt support and understanding’ and that a part of them really wants for their improvement and well-being – even though there may be hard things to do along the way.

Client Handout

The idea of compassionate letter writing is to help you refocus your thoughts and feelings on being supportive, helpful and caring of yourself. In *practicing* doing this it can help you access an aspect of yourself that can help tone down more negative feelings and thoughts.

To start your letter, try to feel that part of you that can be kind and understanding of others; how you would be if caring for someone you like. Consider your general manner, facial expressions, voice tone and feelings that come with your caring self. Think about that part of you as the type of self you would like to be. Think about the qualities you would like your compassionate self to have. It does not matter if you feel *you are* like this – but focus on the *ideal* you would like to be. Spend a few moments really thinking about this and trying to feel in contact with that ‘kind’ part of you.

As you write your letter, try to allow yourself to have *understanding and acceptance* for your distress. For example, your letter might start with “I am sad you feel distressed; your distress is understandable because.....” Note the reasons, realising your distress makes sense. Then perhaps you could continue your letter with... “I would like you to know that.....” (e.g., your letter might point out that as we become depressed, our depression can come with a powerful set of thoughts and feelings – so how you see things right now may be the depression view on things). Given this, we can try and ‘step to the side of the depression’ and write and focus on how best to cope, and what is helpful.

Ideas

There are a number of ideas that you might consider in your letter. Do **not** feel you have to cover them all. In fact you might want to try different things in different letters to yourself. With all of these ideas, although it can be difficult, try to avoid telling yourself what you should or should not think, feel or do. There is no right or wrong, it is the process of trying to think in a different way that is important.

Standing Back: Once you have acknowledged your distress and not blamed yourself for it, it is useful if your letter can help you stand back from the distress of your situation for a moment. If you could do that, what would be helpful for you to focus on and attend to? For example, you might think about how you would feel about the situation in a couple of days, weeks or months, or you might recall that the depression can lift at certain times and remember how you feel then. It can be helpful to recall in your letter, and bring to your attention, times that you have coped with difficulties before; bring those to mind. If there are any tendencies to dismiss them, note them, but try to hold you focus on your letter. Your letter can focus on your efforts and on what you *are* able to do.

Your compassionate side might gently help you see things in a less black and white way. Your compassionate side is never condemning and will help you reduce self-blaming.

Remember your compassionate side will help you with kindness and understanding. Here are some examples: If someone has shunned you and you are upset by that, your compassionate side will help you recognise your upset but also that thoughts such as 'the person doesn't like me, or that I am therefore unlikeable,' maybe very unfair. Perhaps a more balanced view would be the person who shunned you can do this to others and has difficulties of their own; your compassionate side can remind you that you have other friends who don't treat you this way. As another example if you have forgotten to do something, or have made a mistake and are very frustrated and you are cross with yourself, your compassionate side will understand your frustration and anger but help you see that the mistake was a genuine mistake and is not evidence of being stupid or useless. It will help you think about what is the most compassionate and helpful thing to do in these circumstances.

Not alone: When we feel distressed we can often feel that we are different in some way. However, rather than feeling alone and ashamed remember many

others can feel depressed with negative thoughts about themselves, the world or their future. In fact 1 in 20, or more, of us can be depressed at any one time, so the depression is very sad but is far from uncommon. Your depression is **not** a personal weakness, inadequacy, badness or failure.

Self-criticism: If you are feeling down, disappointed or are being harsh on yourself, note in your letter that self-criticism is often triggered by disappointment (e.g., making a mistake or not looking like we would like to), loss (e.g., of hoped for love) or fear (e.g., of criticism and/or rejection). Maybe being self-critical is a way you have learned to cope with these things or take your frustration out on yourself, but this is not a kind or supportive thing to do. Understandable perhaps, but it does not help us deal with the disappointment, loss or fear. So we need to acknowledge and be understanding and compassionate about the disappointment, loss or fear. Allow yourself to be sensitive to those feelings.

Compassionate behaviour: It is useful to think about what might be the compassionate thing *to do* at this moment or at some time ahead – how might your compassionate part help you do those things? So in your letter you may want to think about how you can bring compassion into action in your life. If there are things you are avoiding or finding difficult to do, write down some small steps to move you forward. Try to write down steps and ideas that encourage you and support you to do the things that you might find difficult. If you are unsure what to do, maybe try to brain storm as many options as you can and think which ones appeal to you. Could you ask others for help?

Dilemmas: If you are in a dilemma about something, focus on the gentle compassionate voice inside you and write down the different sides of the dilemma. Note that dilemmas are often difficult, and at times there are hard choices to be made. Therefore, these may take time to work through. Talking through with others might be a helpful thing to do. Acceptance of the benefits and losses of a decision can take time.

Compassion for feelings: Your compassionate side will have compassion for your feelings. If you are having powerful feelings of frustration, anger or anxiety, then compassionately recognise these. Negative emotions are part of being human and can become more powerful in depression or when we are distressed but they do not make you a bad person – just a human being trying to cope with difficult feelings. We can learn to work with these feelings as part of our ‘humanness’ without blaming or condemning ourselves for them. Your compassionate mind will remind you that we often don’t choose to feel negatively and these feelings can come quite quickly. In this sense it is ‘not our fault’, although we can learn how to work with these difficult feelings and take responsibility.

Loss of positive feelings: If you are feeling bad because you have lost positive feelings then we can be compassionate to this loss – it is very sad to lose positive feelings. Sometimes we lose loving feelings because a relationship has run its course, or we are just exhausted, or depression can block positive emotion systems. As we recover from the depression these positive systems can return. Your compassionate letter can help you see this without self-blaming.

What is helpful: Your letter will be a way of practicing how to really focus on things that you feel help you. If thoughts come to mind that make you feel worse, then notice them, let them go and refocus on what might be helpful – remember there are no ‘I should’s’.

Warmth: Now try to focus of the feelings of warmth and genuine wish to help in the letter as you write it. Spend time breathing gently and really try, as best you can, to let feelings of warmth be there for you. When you have written your letter, read it through slowly, with as much warmth as you can muster. If you were writing to somebody else would you feel your letter is kind and helpful? Could you change anything to make it more warm and helpful?

Remember that this is an *exercise* that might seem difficult to do at times but with practice you are exercising a part of your mind that can be developed to

be helpful to you. Some people find that they can rework their letters the next day so they can think through things in a different way. The key of this exercise is the desire and effort of becoming inwardly gentle, compassionate and self-supportive. The benefits of this work may not be immediate but like 'exercising to get fit' can emerge over time with continued practice. Sometimes people find that even though they are depressed they would very much like to develop a sense of self that can be wise and compassionate to both themselves and others. You can practice thinking about how, each day, you can become more and more as you wish to be. As in all things there will be good times and not so good. Spend time imagining your postures and facial expressions, thoughts and feelings that go with being compassionate and practice creating these inside you. This means being open with our difficulties and distress, rather than just trying to get rid of them.