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THE POWER OF SELF-COMPASSION

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We continuously look for concepts and skills that will give our clients the edge; perspectives and approaches to enhance work and personal lives. The practice of 'self-compassion' has caught our attention because of the value it offers in strengthening emotional and cognitive well-being, both critical elements of effective leadership.

There has been much research on the power of compassion in the delivery of healthcare, and considerable resulting evidence of its positive influence on outcomes. Separately, Dr. Kristen Neff and Dr. Chris Germer led the field of research on the application of self-compassion, how to apply compassion to ourselves to enhance daily life, and the results are also compelling. Other researchers, (Breines, Chen & Zhang) have explored its applicability to leadership and personal development.

The combined research indicates that the ability to skilfully apply compassion to oneself has a range of positive outcomes including increased emotional and physical well-being, more optimism, a decrease in procrastination, the ability to make greater progress towards goal achievement and the development of authentic leadership skills.

This paper is a summary of the concept and supporting research, and outlines the steps involved in skill development.

What is Self-Compassion?

Self-compassion is a process of being skilfully self-supportive. In simple terms, it means treating ourselves with the same care we would a close friend for whom we want the best outcomes.

If our friend made a mistake, or had something happen to them that caused suffering or pain, how would we respond? We would encourage the best in them, not through criticism, but through supporting them. We would remind them of their worth, value, capabilities and strengths, and we would discourage their focus on what was diminishing them or making them suffer.

The three elements of it are acknowledging suffering or discomfort (not suppressing it, which can lead to increased intensity), identifying the feeling and responding with kindness (by naming the experience and offering support in response, its impact is reduced), and recognising the 'common humanity' of discomfort (normalising the experience and so reducing a sense of isolation).

Self-Compassion sounds soft. What is the tangible value?

There is a cost to having a lack of compassion towards ourselves, a cost that can vary from simply never achieving the levels of happiness and joy in life we are capable of, to the even higher costs of persistent anxiety and damaged relationships at work and home.

In a complex and competitive world, where 'winning' and 'success' are concepts embodied in us from an early age, we tend to be unforgiving of anything that threatens them. When we lose or fail, even in the smallest of ways, or sometimes even only fear that we might, we can experience emotions of 'fight, flight or freeze'. We are inclined to turn these inward with self-criticism, isolation or rumination, and outward with anger. None of these responses support our well-being, or our capacity for healthy professional and personal relationships.

A regular practice of self-compassion not only makes us feel better, it can help us to do better.

Will Self-Compassion keep me from action? Will I stop being effective and successful?

We think we need to be self-critical to stay on track or to keep motivated to do better, but research shows that being self-critical has the opposite effect. It has the impact of undermining self-confidence and increasing anxiety.

Do your friends become soft and lazy when you support them? Do they start to fail at things when you show them understanding and care?

If a colleague were upset over a mistake he had made and you spoke to him in a reassuring and supportive way, is he likely to recover and perform well, or head to the pub?

If a colleague were upset over a mistake she had made and you told her that you expected no better of her, that she always makes stupid mistakes, that she shouldn't be in that role in the first place because she's not able for it, that she should be ashamed of herself, is she likely to recover and perform well?

Most of us are hard on ourselves when we perceive a flaw or shortcoming. We heavily criticise and sometimes shame ourselves. Our orientation is to beat ourselves up and then cover up.

This doesn't create an appetite for healthy self-evaluation. Self-compassion allows us to be kind to ourselves when we see something we need to change, just as we would be with a child or friend. It is about awareness of 'what is', acknowledging it and creating a space to move on productively and positively. That kindness allows us to accept where we can grow. 'Inner-compassion' gives us the support and encouragement to move forward rather than the 'inner critic' who whips us for being where we are.

How exactly does 'Self-Compassion' work?

The 'inner critic' is a commonly understood term for the internal voice so many of us have which reminds us of our faults and pushes us to work and try harder. It might serve some purpose in our adolescent years, when staying in bed seems a viable option, but the same haranguing, shame-inducing approach brings severely diminishing returns in adult years.

Our 'critical voice' can be so embedded within us that we are not fully conscious of it, or of the damage it causes. Remaining unconscious of its impact can have negative consequences for us, and for those with whom we live and work. Consider the (hopefully!) imaginary colleague whom we berated. Think of how she is likely to be when she arrives home that evening, or the next day when she returns to work. Open, supportive and generous to those around her? Creative, high performing? Unlikely.

There is now a considerable body of evidence proving the power of self-compassion to help us be less afraid of failure and more willing to take risks in pursuit of our goals. We avoid, procrastinate and never start to move towards many of our aspirations because of fear, conscious and unconscious, of how we will treat ourselves if we fail. There are many wasted and lost opportunities. Self-compassion energises us with the expectation that we will meet our struggles, imperfections and failures with the support of compassion and encouragement rather than the sting of self-criticism.

- **The difference between Self-Compassion and Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is about how we think about ourselves. Self-compassion is about how we treat ourselves. They are both important, and they are not the same. Self-esteem often involves comparisons, feeling better about ourselves in relation to others. Self-compassion is treating ourselves with the understanding and kindness we need to thrive. It is something we can give directly to ourselves and not take from anyone else in the process.

In a series of research studies self-compassion proved far more effective in encouraging growth and positive change than self-esteem. [See 'Where is the evidence?' on page 6]

- **Self-Compassion and Personal Growth**

Carol Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford University, developed the terms 'growth' and 'fixed' mindsets to describe the difference between our approaches to learning and failure. When we operate with a 'fixed' mindset, we avoid new experiences where we might be perceived to fail, and this avoidance limits our ability to improve. The opposite occurs with a 'growth' mindset where failure is accepted as a natural and necessary stage in learning. People operating from a growth mindset are more positive and optimistic and will put the effort into expanding their range of capability. Chen et al conducted a series of experiments to explore how self-compassion and self-esteem would impact the development of a 'growth' mindset, and unsurprisingly concluded that self-compassion triggers people to adopt a growth mindset. It does so by encouraging them through the process of learning.

- **The link with Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is about paying attention to what is happening in the present moment. Mindfulness accepts, rather than resists, what is happening as it happens. If we are suffering in some way, we accept the reality of that. This acknowledgement allows us to give ourselves the attention we need. We can then move forward productively and sustainably.

So how, and where, do I start?

1. Notice the suffering or the critical voice

This sounds obvious but is not necessarily so. When we beat ourselves up about something our immediate action is to move away from the pain of it, to ignore or hide it, or rush to fix it. We don't acknowledge the stress, embarrassment or whatever the uncomfortable feeling is. We go straight to problem solving. We can sometimes mistakenly do that with others too, even though we know how hard it is to be on the receiving end of someone rushing to solutions when we simply want to be heard. When someone notices that we are suffering in some way, and acknowledges that, it immediately helps. So that is our first step for ourselves:

Notice and acknowledge the uncomfortable feeling.

2. Name the feeling and respond with kindness

The positive impact of correctly identifying what we are feeling is surprising. What exactly is the emotion? Is it embarrassment, frustration, shame, anger or something else? Naming it shifts our perspective from having an experience to understanding the experience, and so weakens its grip.

When you have labelled what the feeling is, respond to it as you would with a child or someone you cared about, with kindness and care.

Use positive and supportive language:

“I know you feel awkward and it’s uncomfortable, that’s OK.”

“You’re feeling a little embarrassed, it’s natural, we all feel like that at times.”

“It’s understandable to feel this anger now, who wouldn’t? It will pass in time.

Remember your strengths...”

Allow yourself to hear the words and accept the comfort.

3. Acknowledge Common Humanity.

To be human is to be fallible. To be alive is to be less than perfect. At one level we ‘know’ this, but at another, we don’t accept it. We carry idealised notions that we should always be on top of things, in control, striving for perfection. These notions can leave us feeling isolated and separate from others. We know that life throws curved balls and we either catch them or are caught out by them. Both happen to everyone. We often feel we are the only one struggling, or the only person feeling sad or scared right now.

Reminding ourselves that everyone struggles at some stage, that we are as fallible as everyone else, helps us avoid self-pity and to experience our connection with others. It doesn’t mean that we don’t try to make things better, but we do this from a position of knowing that we are not alone in trying. Struggling at times, feeling ‘not good enough’, making mistakes, these are all part of normal life and apply to everyone. There is comfort and strength in that awareness.

Accept your human fallibility and that of everyone else you have ever known.

Practicing Self-Compassion

Developing a regular practice of self-compassion can help create lasting positive change in our lives.

- **See it**

The first thing to do, and you may be doing this already as you read, is to think about an area in your life where you tend to be self-critical. What does the self-critical voice in your head tend to say to you? Take a page and write it out. Write down all that you are saying to yourself on this area. It can be surprising to see the strength of negativity written in front of you, the tone and words used.

Then consider how you would respond if you heard a friend or loved one being spoke to in that way. What would you say to help them? Or what would a wise and caring friend say to you if they could hear the self-critical voice in your head? Write down the compassionate and supportive responses.

Now look at both lists and notice how you feel as you read them. As you consider how those feelings might play out in your life, the impact they might have, you begin to recognise that you have more control than you realised.

Working through this process helps you craft supportive and restorative responses to offer yourself when your self-criticism kicks in.

Our self-compassionate statements are meant to comfort us and encourage us. They are not to flatter or deceive us, but to affirm our worth in a way that can lead us back to what we most want for ourselves.

Take the time to write down some of these compassionate, encouraging responses. And even if it might feel a little awkward, practice saying them out loud. Let yourself hear them. And try to let them in.

- **Feel it**

The second thing is to identify a physical gesture that symbolises caring for you. This might seem a little strange, but touch is a powerful way of connecting and giving comfort. Think of the power of a well-timed hug, a hand hold, a hand on your shoulder. Our physical senses respond to the reassurance of touch and communicate the comfort to our mind and body. Physical touch calms and soothes, even when we are giving it ourselves. Finding a physical way of connecting communicates the offer of comfort to yourself.

Experiment to find what feels comfortable for you. Perhaps holding one hand in the other on your lap, stroking your arm, placing a hand on your stomach. Feel the support. These gestures help stimulate the release of oxytocin which has a positive impact on our emotional responses and contributes to relaxation, trust and psychological stability.

Where is the evidence?

The primary researchers behind the practice of self-compassion are Kristin Neff, Ph.D. of the University of Texas, Austin and Chris Germer, Ph.D. from 2003 to date. Neff was the first to develop a measurement scale for the construct, and it has proved robust across a range of applications.

There is a body of research into the construct across a range of demographic groups (e.g. seniors, students, teenagers, parents of children with autism) and psychological (e.g. positive psychology, self-esteem, resilience).

You can find some research papers at: <http://self-compassion.org/the-research/>

Some of the evidence-based benefits of applying self-compassion are:

- Decrease in anxiety and depression
- Increase in emotional and physical well-being
- Greater sense of self-worth and optimism
- Greater personal responsibility
- Decrease in procrastination
- Greater progress toward goals

You can use Dr. Neff's scale and assess your level of self-compassion at:

<http://self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are/> and also explore a range of developmental exercises through her website: www.selfcompassion.org

Other researchers include Serena Chen, Ph.D., Jia Wei Zhang, Ph.D. and Juliana Bienes, Ph.D. Some of their recent work is summarised in the HBR article, 'Give Yourself a Break; the power of self-compassion' at: <https://hbr.org/2018/09/give-yourself-a-break-the-power-of-self-compassion>

As with any practice, self-compassion requires repetition over time. It might feel a bit awkward at first, as when developing any new skill, but the evidence is compelling that it's a practice that helps us live with greater joy, resilience, and accomplishment.