

Sivananda Ashram Yoga Center

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Mindfulness and Self-Compassion - Practices for Cultivating Inner Resilience

S-1 Title

S-2 image head bowed, arms up in triumph

Human beings face disappointments and difficulties pretty much every day, and even disasters at some point in their human journey.

How do we cope with disappointments that happen every day, losing our wallet and car keys, discovering mold in the bathroom, missing three days at the office to care for a sick child, difficulties that happen every day, disruptive, unwanted changes of the washing machine going on the fritz or the car needing a new transmission.

BIG disappointments and difficulties that are an inevitable part of being a human being that happen over a lifetime, infertility or infidelity, a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, losing a job, a son wounded in combat overseas. Even with disasters that threaten to completely upset our life as we know it, or the lives of those we love and care about, meaning and purpose and values that we care about.

Sometimes too many things go disastrously wrong all at once: a daughter arrested for selling pot, a laptop left on a plane, finding out that the contractor repairing the roof is being sued for

shoddy construction work, all in the same week they are placing an aging parent in a nursing home. We begin to feel like we are drinking from a fire hose and about to go under.

If we or someone we care about loses a job, or loses a relationship, or loses our home, or our health, or our hope, how do we bounce back from the challenges, even disasters inevitable in the human condition?

S-3 Mindful Self-Compassion

The single best protocol I have found to help people be with and move through challenging life events is the Mindful Self-Compassion protocol developed by Kristin Neff, psychologist at University of Texas-Austin and Christopher Germer, psychologist at Harvard.

Because Mindful Self-Compassion simply brings *awareness* to our experience - awareness of what is actually happening *and* our reactions to what is happening - and *acceptance* of our experience, acceptance of what is actually happening *and* acceptance of our reactions to what is happening. Awareness and acceptance of ourselves as the *experiencer* of their experience. Neuroscientists have shown mindfulness and compassion are two of the most powerful agents of brain change known to science, and these practices allow us to shift our

perspective and rewire our brains in ways that are safe, efficient, and effective.

S-4 MSC Activates Caregiving

Mindful Self-Compassion works because it activates the caregiving system in the brain.

- Mindfulness
 - Focuses awareness on experience
 - May I accept this moment, exactly as it is
- Self-Compassion
 - Focuses kindness on experiencer
 - May I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment
- Common Humanity
 - I am not alone; I am not the only one
- Activates caregiving system

There, there, I care. And that activates the release of the oxytocin that calms down the stress response and allows the brain to re-open into a larger perspective. The client shifts from reactivity and contraction to openness, engagement.

I can offer my own example of how powerful the common humanity piece can be. A few months after I moved my eighty-one-year-old dad out to live near me so that I could care for him as his health declined, he had a stroke severe enough to land him in the hospital for a few days and in a skilled nursing facility for a while after that. One morning, he became suicidal. That behavior was more than the nursing facility could take responsibility for. At 5:30 a.m. the staff called me to come and pick him up. In his confused mental state, and despite his frailty, he had managed to climb onto a second-story deck overlooking the courtyard and had threatened to jump.

When I arrived, my dad was waiting in the lobby. Getting him into my car to take him home was no problem, but I was completely bewildered about what to do next. Would he be safe at home? Did I need to move him to a board-and-care facility? Before I got in the car myself, I burst into tears. Right there on the curb in the parking lot, I collapsed and sobbed. All my fear and confusion about his failing health welled up and spilled over. The nurse who had discharged my dad saw my collapse out the window, came out of the building, sat next to me on the curb, and gently took my hand. For the next fifteen minutes, she never said a word. She just held my hand and gently stroked my back as I cried out wave after wave of grief and anguish.

Eventually, as the tears subsided, I looked into the nurse's eyes and saw someone simply seeing me and my pain, caring for my pain and all the pain of all the family members who had ever gone through what I was going through, all the pain of the

human condition. In that moment I knew that my struggle was completely seen, understood, and accepted and I knew I was not the only one. My pain was the pain of common humanity. Her perceiving and accepting that common humanity allowed me to regroup. Her presence conveyed to me that I could find my way through this dark time and helped me recover my confidence. My dad continued to live at home for another 9 months. We had a sweet journey together.

S-5 Hand gestures

- Tightly closed fists (suffering)
- Open palms (mindfulness)
- Arms outstretched (common humanity)
- Hands on heart (compassion)

You can see how essential the steps of MSC would be to help people recover from any trauma. To not run away from their experience or to be hijacked-flooded by it either, but to be with, in an open compassionate mindful way, which allows the brain to pause and settle and shift out of any contracted reactivity into a more open, more bigger picture perspective.

S-6 Benefits

Increased motivation, efforts to learn grow, less fear of failure, greater likelihood to try again, take responsibilities for mistakes, apologies and forgiveness

As other positive emotions, less anxiety, depression, loneliness, better relationships, more social connections, more well-being

S-7 Self-Compassion break

I teach my clients to practice a self-compassion break any time they are feeling stressed, distressed, upset, worried, startled. I will combine it with the hand on the heart exercise we learned earlier. Simply pause, put your hand on your heart or your cheek. The warm safe touch is calming to the nervous system. Come into a compassionate awareness of “Ouch! This is hard! Or scary or I don’t like this” whatever acknowledges your emotional experience in the moment. And then offering phrases similar to these - whatever works. Lately I’ve been saying to myself “I’m not happy!” “May I be kind to myself in this moment.” “May I accept this moment exactly as it is.” (The mindful awareness - the acceptance of reality - is one of the factors that help people recover from any trauma.) “May I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment.” That is the key. Carl Rogers 50 years ago said, “The curious paradox is, when I accept myself exactly as I am, then I can change.”

“May I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment.” Then “May I give myself all the compassion I need.” I sometimes

modify that and suggest my clients say, “May I give myself all the compassion and courageous action that I need.” Those phrases and that pausing to mindfully compassionately care for one’s self as the experiencer of suffering is what shifts the functions of the brain to be able to discern options and take wise action again.

Can practice, even when not startled, just to practice. Call up small amount of negative emotion, recognize in body, focus on breathing, focus on phrases, in and out, let go. So brain already knows how to find pathway.

Story to illustrate this:

Oh no! No internet!

S-8 flow of compassion to others, from others, for self

If it’s challenging for clients to offer themselves compassion (research, 72% of people find it easier to offer to compassion to others, 20% are neutral, only 8% of people feel comfortable offering themselves, compassion), exercise, offer compassion to another (pet); receive compassion from another (us); offer compassion to self or to wounded part of self. All the same emotional flow.

- Sit quietly, comfortably
- Evoke sense of receiving compassion from another
- Evoke sense of offering compassion to another
- Stay in that flow; offer compassion to one's self
- "Don't go hating on yourself."
 - - George Mumford

S - 9 Compassionate Friend

I will also very often teach a **de-conditioning** for emotional intelligence exercise in evoking a Compassionate Friend, which helps resource clients in times of trouble, and is a baby step in reaching out to other people, even people created in their imagination, which we'll learn more about in the next session on relational intelligence.

I will lead this as though you are doing the exercise in your own imagination.

If you allow yourself to sit in a comfortable posture, or lie down in a comfortable posture, coming into a sense of presence, being aware of being in your own body, in this moment, focusing your awareness on the gentle rhythm of your breathing, coming into a sense of relaxation and peacefulness, and then, when you're ready, imagining that you are in your own safe place, a place

that is comfortable for you, where you can feel safe and protected, at ease, content. This may be a room in your own home, it may be a favorite bench in a park or on a hill overlooking the beach, it may be in a café with a friend. You let yourself settle into the safety and comfort of being in your safe place.

Then, you let yourself know that you are going to receive a visitor, someone older, wiser, stronger, someone who knows you and honestly cares about you a great deal. They want you to be happy, and they want to visit with you for a little while.

So you imagine this compassionate friend in quite some detail, what they look like, how they're dressed, how they move, especially what it feels like to you to be in their presence, in their energy field. Then you imagine how you meet and greet this person; do you stand up and shake hands, do you hug, do you bow? Then you imagine you get to have a conversation with this compassionate friend, so imagine how you will do that, sitting across from each other, sitting side by side, going for a walk.

Then, you get to share with this compassionate friend some worry, some upset, some distress that's current for you now. And you imagine your compassionate friend listening receptively, openly, understandingly. You imagine how you feel being listened to and understood and accepted by this compassionate friend. Then you imagine any words of acceptance or

encouragement or support your compassionate friend might have to say. If you could hear whatever you need to hear right now, what would those words be? And imagine listening, imagine what you feel as you hear these words from your compassionate friend.

When the conversation is complete and it's time for the compassionate friend to depart for now, you imagine how you say good-bye, knowing that you can visit with this compassionate friend again any time you wish to. And after your compassionate friend has departed and you are in your safe place again with yourself, you take a moment to pause, notice and reflect on your experience, any shifts in your experience of yourself or shift of the upset you were working with, knowing you have tapped into your own deep intuitive wisdom.

S-10 image of patient and caregivers

This is an exercise in compassion for any of us who are caregivers, because scientists are now redefining compassion fatigue as empathy fatigue. We are motivated to care and to help; we attune to and empathize with the people we are caring for. We take in their feelings, and sometimes take them home. Empathy fatigue. This exercise help us stay grounded and nourished ourselves as caregivers, and stay connected to whoever we are with who is struggling.

S-11 Compassion for Caregivers

1. Sit comfortably, closing your eyes, and take a few deep, relaxing breaths. Allow yourself to feel the sensations of breathing in and breathing out. Notice how your breath nourishes your body as you inhale and soothes your body as you exhale.

2. Let your breathing find its own natural rhythm. Continue feeling the sensations of breathing in and breathing out. If you like, place your hand over your heart or any other place on your body that is soothing, as a reminder to bring not just awareness, but *loving* awareness, to your experience, and to yourself.

3. Aware of any stress you are carrying in your body, inhale fully and deeply, drawing compassion inside your body and filling every cell in your body with compassion. Let yourself be soothed by inhaling deeply, and by giving yourself the compassion you need when you experience discomfort.

4. Now focus your attention on your *in-breath*, letting yourself enjoy the sensations of breathing in, one breath after another, noticing how your in-breath nourishes every cell in your body, and then releasing your breath.

5. If you like, you can also carry a word on each in-breath, such as “nourishing,” or “loving,” or “compassion and care,” or “deep ease” or “inner peace.” Give to yourself whatever you need in this moment. You can also imagine inhaling warmth or light – whatever works for you.

6. Now, bring to mind someone to whom you would like to send warmth and kindness and care and goodwill, either *someone you love or someone who is struggling and needs compassion*. Visualize that person clearly in your mind.

7. Shift your focus now to your *out breath*. Feel your body breathe out, and send warmth and kindness and care and goodwill to this person with each exhalation. If you like, you can add a kind word with each out-breath – soothing, soothing, or ease, ease, or an image of caring and compassion.

8. Now, feel your body breathe *both in and out* – breathing in for yourself and breathing out for another. “Nourishing for me; nourishing for you.” Or “soothing for me; soothing for you.” Or whatever words works for you. Eventually, you can simply say, “one for me; one for you. One for me; one for you.” Feel the breath of kindness flowing in, flowing out.

S-12 **Caregiving with Equanimity**

As you maintain that rhythm, listen carefully to these words, letting them gently roll through your mind:

*Everyone is on his or her own life journey.
I am not the cause of this person’s suffering,
Nor is it entirely within my power to make it go away,
Even if I wish I could.
Moments like this are difficult to bear,
Yet I may still try to help if I can.*

9. Allow your breathing to flow in and out, like the gentle movement of the sea, flowing in and flowing out. Let yourself be a *part* of this limitless, boundless flow, breathing in and breathing out.

10. You can focus a little more on yourself, or a little more on the other person – whatever you need.

Breathing in for yourself and breathing out for another.
“Nourishing for me; nourishing for you.” Or “soothing for me; soothing for you.” Or whatever words works for you.
Eventually, you can simply say, “one for me; one for you. One for me; one for you.” Feel the breath of kindness flowing in, flowing out.

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11. Then gently bring your awareness back to breathing in and out, in this moment, in this place, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

[no slide] Skillful Distraction

Whenever we're working with powerful emotions, it's important that we feel empowered to use another tool that is invaluable and often undervalued in managing emotions - that of skillful distraction - being able to shift the focus of attention, switch the channel. To take a break - make a cup of tea, walk the dog, call a friend, go for a swim or a bike ride - shift the focus of attention temporarily and shift the physical energy - do something different, move in a different way. When you feel settled and grounded again, then you can return to exploring the difficult feeling or memory. It's a skillful way to transition between working with difficult emotions and cultivating positive emotions.

All of these exercises of Mindful Self-Compassion and related exercises use the positive pro-social emotion of compassion to help bring the functioning of the brain back into our natural physiological equilibrium that we learned about last night so we can begin to deal with whatever adversity or crisis we are facing.