

Sivananda Ashram Yoga Center

June 17, 2017

Saturday Afternoon workshop

Recovering the Resilient Inner Self

S-1 Title

Mindful Self-Compassion, as taught last night, can help us cope with difficult external events, but also the internal messages we give ourselves about those events. And those critical inner messages can derail our resilience.

An example of using mindful self-compassion to cope with my own difficult messages:

Shoes in wet cement story

Here's a story from my own experience that perhaps illustrates how we can bounce back from difficulties and take responsibility for shifting how we cope with challenges, overcome suffering and learn to sail our own ship.

When I had an office in the Sunset neighborhood of San Francisco, I would park my car in Golden Gate Park and walk

the two blocks to my office, something I could do on automatic pilot.

One day, more distracted than usual mulling over something I was worried about, I wasn't paying enough attention to where I was walking and blithely stepped into a sidewalk of freshly laid wet cement - up to my ankles.

The cascade of critical thoughts erupted immediately, "You stupid klutz! Look what you've done! You've ruined your shoes! Now you'll be late to work; you'll have to cancel clients today; you'll probably lose clients over this. How could you!" The whole deep slide into the rabbit hole of shaming-blaming-catastrophizing.

Fortunately, by then I had enough mindfulness and self-compassion practices under my belt to catch up to myself. "Whoa! Wait a minute! I need to shift my entire approach here! I'm not the only person on the planet who made a mistake today just because they weren't paying attention. This is probably not the only mistake I'm going to make today. I need to slow down here, collect myself, try to be a little kinder to myself right here, right now, step out of this sidewalk, and deal."

With that shift in attitude and shift in response, I did pick my feet up out of my shoes and pick my shoes up out of the cement.

There happened to be an apartment building with an outdoor water faucet just a few steps away. As I began to wash off my shoes, I began to think a little more clearly. “This happened. Other than my own embarrassment and my own inner critic wailing the hide out of me, there’s no catastrophe here. Shit happens. This happened. I’m dealing with it as best as I can. This is going to be okay.

As an on-site construction worker came over to me with some paper towels to wipe off my shoes (I’m grateful to this day for his kindness - no teasing or taunting, no further embarrassment) I began to have some hope that I could save my shoes (I did). I also began to have a little pride and a lot of gratitude that I was coping as well as I was.

Then came the big shift. “Yeah, shit happens, but shift happens, too. If I can shift my attitude in these circumstances, I can shift my attitude in any circumstances.” That’s the big shift.

Shit Happens. Shift Happens

Shit happens. Shift happens. If I can shift my response in this moment, I can shift my response in any moment. That’s the big shift. And mindful self-compassion helps make that shift possible; we recover our inner resilient self.

S-2 Q Fosha

I'm very fond of this quote from Diana Fosha, founder of Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy:

The roots of resilience are to be found in the felt sense of being held in the mind and heart of an empathic, attuned, and self-possessed other.

Diana calls this a relationship of a true other to a person's true self. And it can be any true other to any true self. When we are the true other to the true self of any other person we can see and reflect their true self back to them when they have forgotten, or perhaps have never known, who they truly are. We remember their best self when they are mired in their worst self and accept without judgment all of who they are. True others are not necessarily the people closest to us, though they may be: they are the people most attuned to us, those most accepting of our innate goodness, our essential worth as human beings. For many people, a true other can be a spiritual figure or deity; for others it may be a teacher, or friend. When someone who is acting as a true other genuinely sees us at their best, we can see ourselves in that light, too. This mirroring helps us rediscover our resilient self.

The power of the true other can be seen in the example of the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde when he was imprisoned in England in 1895 for homosexuality. As Wilde was walking through the throngs of jeering hecklers on his way to prison, his

publisher and friend, Robert Ross, quietly bowed and tipped his hat to him. Wilde later recounted in his autobiographical work *De Profundis* that his friend's gesture of respect was what enabled him to endure his two years of imprisonment with his courage and dignity intact. When Ross acknowledged Wilde's true self, Wilde's resilience came to the fore.

S-3 Q Dinah Craik

The felt-sense kind of empathy that creates the conditions for those roots of resilience moment-by-moment is expressed in the words of the 19th century British novelist Dinah Craik:

*Ah, the comfort,
The inexpressible comfort
Of feeling safe with a person.
Having neither to weigh out thoughts
Nor words,
But pouring them all right out, just as they are,
Chaff and grain together;
Certain that a faithful hand
Will take them and sift them;
Keeping what is worth keeping and,*

With the breath of kindness,

Blow the rest away.

- Dinah Craik

A Life for a Life, 1859

Among my favorite stories that also illustrated the attunement and empathy and reflecting from a true other to a true self is one I heard from the meditation teacher Jack Kornfield. A seven-year-old boy and his family went to a restaurant for dinner. When the waitress asked the boy what he wanted for dinner, he replied without hesitation, “A hot dog and French fries!” His mother interrupted, telling the waitress, “He’ll have meatloaf with mashed potatoes and gravy.” After the waitress had taken the parents’ orders, she turned to the boy and asked, “Do you want ketchup and mustard on your hot dog, son?” As the waitress was leaving, the boy turned to his parents and said, “She thinks I’m real!”

The safety this moment-by-moment deep listening provides creates a neural safety net in the brain that primes the brain’s receptivity to new experiences, new learning, and activates the brain’s neuroplasticity for change.

When we can engage with people in interactions that are safe, resonant, not shaming-blaming-judgmental or critical, but supportive, validating, we strengthen our own inner sense of belonging and worth, and that becomes a powerful resource to

strengthen our own capacities of resilience, to shift from contraction and reactivity to a more engaged and open-minded perspective in any situation.

S-4 Cultivating the Wiser Self

1. Find a comfortable position to sit quietly. Allow your eyes to gently close. Breathe deeply a few times into your belly and allow your awareness to come more deeply into your body. Allow yourself to breathe comfortably. Become aware of relaxing into a gentle field of well-being.
2. When you are ready, imagine you are in our own safe place, somewhere where you feel comfortable, safe, relaxed and at ease. This could be a room in your home, a favorite cabin in the woods or a place by a pond or lake, or in a café with a friend.
3. Then let yourself know you are going to receive a visit from your Wiser Self, perhaps an older wise, stronger version of yourself. Someone who embodies the qualities you aspire to, and is mature and settled in them.
4. As your Wiser Self arrives in your safe place, imagine your Wiser Self in quite some detail. Notice how old your wiser self is, how they are dressed, how they move. Notice how you greet your Wiser Self. Do you go out to meet them? Do you invite them in? Do you shake hands, bow, or hug?

5. Imagine yourself sitting and talking with your wiser self, or going for a walk together. Notice their presence, their energy, and how it affects you.

6. Then, in your imagination, you can ask your wiser self how they came to be who they are.... Ask what helped them most along the way.... What did they have to let go of to become who they are?... Can they share examples of when and how they triumphed over adversity?... You may choose to ask them about a particular problem or challenge facing you now. Notice what advice your wiser self offers that you can take with you. Listen carefully to all they have to tell you.

7. Imagine what it would be like to embody your wiser self. Invite them to become part of you. Notice how it feels to inhabit your wiser self from the inside out and to experience your wiser self within you. When you are ready, imagine your wiser self becoming separate from you again.

8. Imagine that your wiser self offers you a gift—an object, a symbol, a word or phrase—to remind you of this meeting. Receive this object into your hand and place it somewhere in your clothing for safekeeping. Your wiser self will let you know their name; remember it well.

7. As you prepare to leave, take a few gentle breaths to anchor this connection with your wiser self. Know that you can evoke this experience of encountering your wiser self anytime you choose. Imagine thanking your wiser self for the time you have spent together; imagine saying goodbye. Take a moment to reflect on the entire meeting and conversation. Notice any insights or shifts from the experience.

You may ask your client to write down their experience with their wiser self to help integrate it into their conscious memory and to use it any time they need guidance from within about how to be more resilient. As with any use of imagination to access our deep intuitive knowing, the more they practice encountering their wiser self, the more reliably they will be able to embody his or her wisdom as they respond to the challenges and difficulties of their lives.

S-5 Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us

Rewiring Negative Views of Yourself through Seeing the Goodness That Others See in You

And one more...

1. Sit or lie comfortably. Allow your eyes to gently close. Focus your attention on your breathing. Rest comfortably in the simple presence of awareness. When you're ready, let yourself become

aware of how you are holding yourself in this moment. Are you feeling kind toward yourself? Are you uneasy with yourself? Are you feeling critical of yourself? Just notice, just be aware and accepting of what is, without judgment—or if there is judgment, noticing that.

2. Then, when you're ready, bring to mind someone in your life whom you know loves you unconditionally, someone in whose presence you feel safe. This could be a teacher or dear friend; a partner, parent, or child; or a beloved dog or cat. It could be a spiritual figure—Jesus or the Dalai Lama, or your own wiser self. Or it could simply be a memory from any time in your life when someone accepted you as you are and loved you.

3. Imagine yourself sitting with this person face to face. Visualize the person looking at you with acceptance and tenderness, love, joy. Feel yourself taking in their love and acceptance of you.

4. Now imagine yourself being the other person, looking at yourself through their eyes. Feel that person's love and openness being directed toward yourself. See in yourself the goodness, the sacred humanness that the other person sees in you. Let yourself savor this awareness of your own goodness.

5. Now come back to being yourself. You are in your own body again, experiencing the other person looking at you again, with

so much love and acceptance. Feel yourself taking in that love and acceptance. Take the love deeply into your own being. Feel it in your body. Notice how and where you feel that love and acceptance in your body—as a smile, as a warmth in your heart—and savor it.

6. Take a moment to reflect on your experience. You are learning to recondition past negative views of yourself. Set the intention to remember this feeling any time you choose to.

S-6 Cultivating Self-Acceptance

You can also try this exercise of reconditioning:

1. You can begin to accept aspects of yourself that you have previously found unacceptable by pairing a negative message or belief with the embracing stance of self-acceptance. For example:

“Even though I feel lost and confused right now, I deeply and completely love and accept myself.”

“Even though my finances are a mess and I’m in real trouble, I deeply and completely love and accept myself.”

“Even though I feel like it’s all my fault that my wife left, I deeply and completely love and accept myself.”

2. If both the awareness and acceptance seem like too much of a stretch, head yourself in the right direction with a modified phrase like “I’m willing to consider trying to deeply and completely love and accept myself.” Let yourself notice that even if you deeply believe the negative statement about yourself to be true, the deep love and acceptance of yourself can simultaneously be true as well.

S-7 Using Self-Compassion to Answer the Inner Critic

- CHANGE RELATIONSHIP TO INNER CRITIC rather than getting rid of it
- Identify typical message/tone of inner critic
- Write letter to a friend describing reactions to inner critic
- (You write) letter from friend offering empathy, encouragement, support, suggestions
- Read friend’s letter to you; write a response

Now, without a doubt the most difficult inner part to integrate into our sense of self is the inner critic, the voice that constantly runs a negative commentary about everything we

do and think and feel. “How come you’re still trying to get approval from your dad (or wife, or son)? Don’t you know you’re a lost cause? You don’t even like yourself half the time!”

Very often clients would rather get rid of the inner critic, to never ever hear from it again, and that desire is understandable. They want to be free of the misery that the inner client causes them. And...the deeper healing is to come into a different relationship to the inner critic, to understand the job it is trying to do to keep us safe from harm; it’s always jumping in to make sure we don’t do something stupid that would cause us to be disapproved of...and exiled...by others.

This is a **de-conditioning** exercise to come into a different relationship with the inner critic. It is a written reflection exercise. We learn more about the power of written reflection to help us get a little distance from whatever emotional turmoil might be disturbing us in session on healing trauma and moving into post-traumatic growth. For now we’ll just practice this exercise.

1. Ask the client to identify a typical comment or running commentary from their inner critic that causes them to feel badly about themselves: a habitual pattern of self-criticism or self-contempt that derails their resilience or at least tries to drag their efforts to be resilient through the mud. “You’re so lazy!” or “You sure are out of shape these day.” Have

them write down the comment as you typically hear it. Have them notice the tone of voice the inner critic uses. Notice their own response to hearing that tone of voice inside their head.

2. Ask the client to write a letter to a trusted friend (or to you) about this comment and their struggles with it. (They won't actually mail the letter.) Have them describe what usually triggers this self-criticism; their typical reactions—body sensations, feelings, and thoughts—to hearing this inner voice; any fears of a germ of truth in the criticism; their wishes and desires for understanding and support in dealing with this repetitive pattern.

3. Putting yourselves in the place of the friend they wrote to, ask them write a letter back to themselves. Writing in their friend's voice, (or your voice) convey empathy for the pain of being pummeled by these repetitive criticisms. Acknowledge how hard it is to be vulnerable to this particular form of suffering. Include an appreciation of the client's own wholeness and goodness, all the client's strengths, all their weaknesses, including the ones the inner critic is currently harping on. Include the friend's love and acceptance of the client, exactly as they are, with all of the client's human imperfections, and the friend's understanding of all the events that created the client's way of being and their particular flavor of the universally human inner critic. The client can include any suggestions they imagine their friend might add in the letter; be sure

they include the friend's care for the client's well-being and the friend's wish that the client find their way to wise action and relief from this suffering.

4. After writing this second letter, the client puts it aside for awhile. When the client reads it again, ask them to receive and take in the compassion they have conveyed for themselves to themselves.

5. After the client has taken in the self-compassion from the second letter they wrote, ask them to write a third simple letter, this time back to the friend, (or you) thanking the friend for their support and reflecting on what the client has learned from the friend's letter. Ask the client to make a note of any new behaviors of self-care they can now follow up with, based on the encouragement they have received through these letters.

S-8 Guest House - Rumi

This being human is a guest-house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,

Some momentary awareness come

As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.

S-9 Rumi....

He may be clearing you
out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

- Rumi

S-10 Befriending Yourself by Accepting the Many Parts of Yourself

This exercise of **de-conditioning for relational intelligence** is adapted from the pioneering family therapist Virginia Satir's

Parts Party. It's about befriending yourself by accepting the many parts of yourself, including the part you may not like so very much.

This exercise does require that client has developed the Wiser Self or Compassionate Friend to "hold" the inquiry of the exercise. Again, I'll be leading this as you would lead a client.

1. Settle comfortably in your seat. Allow your eyes to gently close. Focus your attention on your breathing. Rest comfortably in the awareness of simply being.

2. When you're ready, imagine you are outside a theater. Imagine the building, the doors, the posters outside. Walk up to one of the doors, open it, and walk into the lobby. Open another door and walk into the empty theater. Walk all the way down to the first or second row and take a seat in the center of the row. An empty stage lies in front of you. All is quiet.

3. Now imagine that the first figure to come out on the stage is your wiser self, standing in the center. This figure that represents all the qualities you aspire to: wisdom, strength, courage, compassion, competence, acceptance.

4. Now imagine other characters coming on to the stage one by one. Each of these imaginary characters embodies a particular quality in yourself. These characters could be people you know,

yourself at a different age, people you know from the movies or history or literature, animals, or cartoon characters.

The first character embodies a quality in yourself that you really, really like. Take a moment to let that character take the stage and remember it (perhaps make a note).

A second character comes on stage embodying another positive quality in yourself. Again let that character materialize on the stage and remember it.

Now bring a third character to the stage that embodies a quality in yourself that you really don't like all that much. In fact, you wish it weren't part of you, but you know it is. Let this character materialize and take a moment to remember it.

Bring on a fourth character that embodies another negative quality in you.

5. Now you have on stage your wiser self, two characters embodying positive qualities, and two characters embodying negative qualities. Ask each character in turn what special gift they bring to you by being part of you: ask the positive ones first, then the negative ones. As you listen to their responses, notice what lessons you learn from their being a part of you. Each one has some wisdom or learning to offer.

6. Next, ask your wiser self what gifts and lessons these parts have to offer you. Listen carefully for the answers.

7. Briefly thank each character for coming to be with you. Watch as they leave the stage one by one, the wiser self last.

8. Take a moment to notice and reflect on your experience from doing this exercise. Notice any insights, any shifts. Take a moment to remember and embrace the lessons of each of these four characters, especially the negative ones: each is an integral part of you, essential to your wholeness.

9. Then imagine yourself getting up out of your seat and walking back up the aisle, through the lobby and back outside the theater. Turn around to look at the theater where all this happened. Then slowly come to awareness again of sitting quietly, and when you're ready, open your eyes.

When I lead clients or workshop participants in these exercises, I always allow time at the end to pause, notice, and reflect on the experience, especially any shifts or insights gained from the experience. That's how the brain can consciously, intentionally integrate the benefit of the exercise.

1. Find a time and place to sit quietly without interruption. Settle into a comfortable position, take a few deep breaths, and relax into a state of mindful presence. Let any thoughts or concerns fade into the background. Then bring to your awareness a sense of your wiser self, the part of you that embodies your essential wisdom and goodness.

2. Bring to mind someone you are currently having difficulties with: a neighbor who turns up the television too late at night; a coworker who misses important deadlines; a sister-in-law who dominates every discussion at the dinner table. Imagine that you can introduce this person to your wiser self and then stand to the side as you overhear the conversation between them.

3. Listen to how your wiser self handles the conversation with the difficult person: what they say, how they handle the energy of your difficult person. You are overhearing your own inner wisdom being patient and skillful with your difficult person.

4. When the conversation between your wiser self and the difficult person is complete, notice how the difficulty is resolved. Notice what you overheard, what you learned, what advice you are taking in from your wiser self.

5. Let the difficult person fade from the scene. Imagine that your wiser self turns to you, offers you a word or phrase of advice,

and offers you one symbolic gift you can hold in your hand to remember this conversation by. You may chose to write down your reflections for future reference.

S-12 Wished For Outcome

The exercise I use to **re-condition negative relational memories** is one of the most powerful I use with clients and workshop participants. I'll walk us through the exercise; if you find yourself doing the exercise, and people do, please do practice good self-care and stay within your comfort zone. The exercise is called Wished for Outcome and again, starting small. One moment of one memory, so the brain has a chance to reprocess the memory and you have a chance to develop a sense of competence in using the tool. You're welcome to listen and observe if that feels more comfortable to you.

So, as I always like to do when reconditioning, we begin by coming into a sense of presence, aware of being in our own body in this moment, in this place. And bringing a sense of kindness and openness to one's experience, evoking a sense of one's own true and deep inner goodness. Then, beginning the exercise by remembering one moment, one small moment, when an interaction between you and another person went awry, and you wound up feeling not very good about yourself, you wound up feeling badly. Stay anchored in your own awareness and your own self-compassion as you evoke this memory, and you light up all the neural networks constellating this memory by

remembering where you were, who you were with, remembering what you said, and what they said. Remembering what you did, and what they did. And remembering how all of that made you feel, at the time, or even now as you remember the event. Notice how you feel, or felt, and see if you can locate where you feel, or felt, that in your body. The visceral sense of the experience. Notice any negative thoughts you may have about yourself now because of what you experienced then. Let the evoking of this negative experience be as vivid as you can, lighting up the memory so it can be rewired.

Then, you create the positive resource that you will juxtapose with this negative memory to do the rewiring, by beginning to imagine a different outcome to this scenario. A different more satisfactory resolution of the event. Remembering, whatever you can imagine is real to the brain, even if this new ending never could have happened in real life.

So you begin to imagine something different you might have said. You imagine something different the other person could have said, even if that never could have happened in real life. Let your brain do its own imagining and its own rewiring. Imagine something different you might have done. Imagine the other person doing something differently, even if that never could have happened in real life. Let your imagination create a more satisfactory resolution of the entire event. You can even imagine someone who wasn't there at the time coming in and doing something helpful.

As this new scenario unfolds, let it come to a new more wished for outcome. And light up all the neural networks of this new resolution. Let yourself feel how you feel with this new ending, and where you feel those feelings in your body. Let yourself notice any new more positive thoughts you have about yourself, given this new outcome. Let the experience of this resolution be vivid in its details and vital in your imagination. Strengthen your experience of the thoughts and feelings of this new ending.

Then, gently touch back in to the original negative experience. Touch it lightly. And then let it go and return to resting in the experience of the new ending. Then touch into the negative experience again, just briefly; notice any shifts. Then return to the resource of the new positive ending. Touch into the negative again one more time, let it go, and rest in the feelings and thoughts of the new positive ending.

Then you take a moment to pause and reflect on your experience of the entire exercise, noticing any shifts.

This technique of reconditioning does not change what happened, but it does change our relationship to what happened. And it doesn't re-write history, but it does rewire the brain.

When we can pause and notice any shift, usually we notice that the negative experience feels less charged. This is what happens

in trauma therapy. You might be encouraged to try this technique again on another memory or part of a memory. And again. Eventually the brain learns how to generalize this technique. We don't have to do all 4,957 interactions that ever went awry in our life. Our sense of self in relationship to these memories changes, our sense of self in terms of competence to recover from trauma is changed. People no longer have to identify themselves as a victim of trauma or even as a survivor of trauma. They can identify themselves as a whole human being who has learned to grow from the ups and downs of their life.

S-13 Deep listening

The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention....A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.

- Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.

When we shift our attention toward listening, our whole world changes. Learning to listen is equal to learning to love.

- Ruth Cox

S-14 Deep Listening exercise

- What brings you joy in your life?
- What has brought you sorrow?
- What worries you now?
- When have you found courage in dark times?
- What are you grateful for?
- What are you proud of?

S-15 image, head bowed, arms in triumph