

SESSION 12: Fostering Self-Compassion

WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

If you're new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the first ten sessions because they make up the core foundation. You'll need this to benefit from the remaining sessions

SO LET'S GET STARTED

Again, as a reminder, the 3 As of awakening are *Attending*, *Appreciating*, and *Acting* with love. Attending leads to appreciation, which then leads to skillful loving action. Appreciation has two meanings, however: both understanding the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both of these aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called "Appreciative Attending," generate wisdom and reverence, which enable us to fulfill our purpose—to nurture and savor Life. Inspired by reverence for Life, we can then take *Action* to benefit all of Life—others and ourselves—with a loving heart, while enjoying each brief and precious moment of existence.

In our last session, we defined self-compassion and discussed the barriers to self-compassion. We spoke of self-compassion being actions we take to relieve our own suffering or enhance our own well-being. We discussed self-compassion as being kind, encouraging, supportive, and helpful to ourselves. We discussed the benefits of self-compassion in easing our suffering and promoting our joy, vitality, and productivity.

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We also discussed the barriers to self-compassion. These stem from the Love Wound and its manifestations, including a lack of reverence for ourselves, conditional self-esteem, self-hatred, a misbelief that self-criticism is good for us, a related belief in the value of punishment, negative beliefs about self-compassion, perfectionism and letting in the negative messages of critical and judgmental people. Hopefully you were able to explore your barriers to self-compassion and decide for yourself the value of self-compassion.

Today we're going to focus on practices for fostering self-compassion.

Developing Self-Compassion

While your self-compassion can't be reliant on what others provide, it helps to inspire your self-reverence by surrounding yourself with loving people. People who love you will help you to love both yourself and others. So, remember that you need others to get by, and reach out for their support and guidance when you're hurting. **In order to heal, participate in loving and being loved.**

Developing self-compassion requires an intentional daily practice until it changes your brain and becomes a default way of life and way of being. So, **start your days with an intention to be unconditionally kind to yourself, and do at least one good deed for yourself every day.** Consciously affirm not only your basic goodness, but even cherish your many gifts. Remind yourself that you are sacred.

If this seems difficult at first, act as if you love yourself, and the feeling will eventually follow. Imagine what you would say to a friend and then say it to yourself. When self-hatred is strong and you feel you don't deserve compassion, just start with an intention to want to treat yourself with kindness.

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Make a commitment to be your own ideal, nurturing parent. Vow to take very good care of yourself and do nothing to harm yourself. Don't addict or do other things to hurt yourself for short-term relief, knowing this isn't an act of self-love. Ask for help when self-destructive urges or cravings threaten to overwhelm you.

Have hope for yourself, knowing you can reverse toxic self-criticism. Practice radical self-reverence, as you accept yourself as you are with all your faults, flaws, and failings.

Practice presence because awareness heals—you can't heal what you can't feel. Without mindfulness, you often don't notice your suffering. You may not realize you're causing yourself pain through harsh self-criticism. Appreciative attending corrects this by including the practice of friendly, nonjudgmental awareness and acceptance of the Now. That allows you to accept the fact that you're suffering, and it opens the door to self-compassion.

Practice kind presencing by slowing down when you feel threatened. Take slow, deep, intentional breaths. Take a pause in what you're doing. Then be the observer of your experience. Attend within with kind awareness. Note that you are struggling. Mentally stand back. Note if self-criticisms are arising in consciousness. If they do, redirect your attention to more self-compassionate thoughts. Replace thoughts such as "I'm such an idiot" with a self-compassionate thought such as "I'm sorry you're having a hard time." This is called **compassionate thought substitution**. In this practice, you are practicing being your own best friend.

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Presenting in this way allows you to become aware of your self-critic. Notice your tone with yourself. Then, thank your critical mind for its thoughts (the mind is just doing what it does) and gently let the negative thoughts go. Replace negativity with self-nurturing.

You can build your capacity for presence in two ways. The **first is to practice presentencing with mundane tasks like driving, brushing your teeth, or doing the dishes**. Do these things wholeheartedly with full presence as much as you can, returning your attention over and over again to the task at hand. Note touch sensations, sights, sounds, smells, and tastes.

The **second practice for cultivating presence is meditation, ideally in your morning time for silence, solitude, and stillness, even if you start your day with just five minutes**. Make it your goal in your meditation practice to catch attention when it wanders and bring it back to your focus of attention, which for most of us is the breath.

Your presence practice will help you catch yourself beating yourself up. It will allow you to retrieve awareness from the incessant stream of thoughts in your head. This will help you avoid getting carried away by fantasies, imaginations, and projections. You'll have the space to ask yourself if what you're thinking is true and how you know 100% that it's true. You will compassionately see yourself just as you are—no more and no less—and make a distinction between who you are and what you do. While you may discern your actions to be unskillful, refrain from judging your personhood—that is off limits.

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The key to healing and growth is kind self-acceptance. One way you can cultivate this is by engaging in **“compassionate imagery”**. In this practice, you visualize an ideal, loving parent showing your child self great loving compassion. If possible, carry a picture of yourself as a young child and take it out when you detect the onslaught of self-criticism. Imagine yourself as both the loving parent to yourself and yourself as the young child. Note how this practice replaces self-condemnation with kind, loving care and concern.

Start with a few rounds of slow breathing at first. Then bring your images to mind of yourself as a loving parent and yourself as a young child. Pretend on the outside by taking on the facial expression and tone of voice of a loving parent to yourself. You might say out loud something to yourself like “I’m sorry you’re having a hard time.”

This increases positive emotions and reduces negative emotions. So, **take a self-compassion break whenever you find yourself being self-critical.**

Notice that you’re suffering and remind yourself that distress is a part of life for everyone. Abstain from harsh self-judgment or self-criticism, and don’t “should” on yourself. Use gentle, soothing words when you talk to yourself, tending to yourself the way you would an innocent, wounded child.

Journaling about your difficulties with a kind attitude toward yourself can foster self-compassion. It’s a great way to reflect on your life and go deeper below the surface. Consider creating a **“Compassionate Thought Diary”**. In it you can log your self-critical thoughts, what triggered them, your tone of voice, and the degree of belief you have in these self-critical thoughts. Then you might note what emotions, such as anxiety, anger, sadness, or despair, that go along with your self-critical thoughts. What physical sensations are there?

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Write in your journal what imperfections make you feel inadequate? What judgments do you have toward yourself? Write what your self-critic says to you. Write about the advantages and disadvantages of self-criticism and self-compassion. Write to yourself as your unconditionally loving, ideal parent. Or imagine what advice you'd give to a friend. How are they different from self-condemnation? See for yourself that self-compassion gives you the benefits you falsely believed you were getting by beating yourself up—only without the pain. Use this practice to develop a more realistic, kinder, more balanced view of yourself. Explore how you will feel about a difficult situation a week, a month, or a year from now? Will it matter? This can put things into perspective. What can you do to cope with your adversity and care for yourself? What would be a compassionate conclusion to your dilemma?

Another great exercise when you are in pain is to **write yourself a compassionate letter**. Write as if you were writing to a good friend or a cherished child. Provide yourself with a kinder, more balanced, more helpful perspective on life's troubles. Normalize what you're going through. Show empathy, care and concern to yourself. Note that we're all imperfect. Write about things you can do to comfort yourself or to help solve the problem.

Another great journaling technique when you're feeling down on yourself is to **write about what you appreciate in yourself and in your life**. What are you grateful for? What gifts can you feel grateful for? What achievements can you feel good about? What are the good things in your life? What things give you pleasure?

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Ask yourself if you'd want to be perfect even if you could be. What if everyone were perfect? What kind of world would that be? Is perfection even possible? We need to accept and cherish ourselves and everyone as remarkable creatures of beauty, even with our foolishness, destructiveness, ignorance, character flaws, and lack of skill. Imagine yourself and others as innocent babies. See our common human vulnerabilities. Everyone is just doing their best to get by, playing the cards they were dealt as best they can. This realization inspires compassion and forgiveness for everyone, including ourselves.

Reframe the negative criticisms your mind generates as more positive, loving, empathic thoughts. You can do this through a two-step *negation-affirmation* process:

1. **Negate the negative:** First, state the opposite of the negative thought by inserting a word like “not.” For example, if you have the thought, “I’m a loser,” firmly state, “I’m NOT a loser!” If you can, say it out loud with feeling and force. “I’m NOT a loser!!!” Then, notice how you feel. Do you still feel bad? Is there still a feeling of self-hatred? If so, repeat the negative of the negative... “I’m NOT a loser!” Repeat this over and over until the pain of the negative thought goes away.

2. **Affirm the positive:** Second, replace the negative thought with a more loving, yet realistic affirmation. For the thought, “I’m such a loser,” you might say, “I’m learning from my mistakes.” Say your affirmation (make sure it’s true and believable) in the present tense.

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Repeat this technique over and over. Do a mindfulness check in with yourself when you go to bed and when you get up. Is there self-hatred? If so, practice the technique in that moment. With repetition, you'll notice that your negative, self-critical, self-hating thoughts will gradually die down.

While practicing this feeling-thought modification technique, acknowledge your suffering and pain. Practice loving acceptance of whatever comes into your awareness. Then, imagine what a loving, supportive mother or father would say to soothe and encourage you. Say your affirmations in the voice of your wise, loving, ideal parent.

When you see your harsh self-critic at work, note your negative thoughts, smile at them, negate them, and let them go. Remind yourself of your basic goodness as you let negative states pass and practice mindfully showing yourself unconditional love day by day, moment by moment.

These practices will cultivate your compassionate thinking, which is critical for self-compassion, as our thoughts determine our emotions and behaviors. It's not the situation you're in that determine your actions, but the thoughts, meanings, and interpretations you bring to that situation. Self-critical thinking leads to negative feelings, which can then lead to negative behaviors or to passivity and withdrawal.

This brings us to the topic of compassionate behavior. Once we become adept at slowing down, presencing, and thinking and feeling in compassionate ways, we then need to show ourselves compassion in our actions. **There are three ways in which we directly or indirectly show ourselves compassion.**

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The first is to do things to soothe ourselves. This includes taking very good care of ourselves. This is where we practice being our own best friend. There are a thousand different ways we can care for ourselves, limited only by our imagination. It could be a movie, a good book, taking a walk, or a warm bath or shower.

If it feels uncomfortable to care for yourself, just persist, knowing it is the right thing to do even if you feel you don't deserve it. Remind yourself that your vitality ripples out to benefit others. Focus on your **INTENT** to show yourself compassion. Keep at it until the discomfort fades.

The second way to show yourself compassion is to be kind to others, because this feels so good it will help you feel better. Give freely to others with an open hand. Show gratitude and appreciation. Take a friend out to dinner or on an outing. Affirm the good things you see in others. Provide emotional support. Give others the gift of your time and your kind presence. Since loving feels so good, loving others will help you to feel better.

The third way to show yourself compassion is to take care of your business. This includes attending to problems and things that need to be done with courage and strength. Take small steps and make small actions to chip away at the things that are stressing you.

A good rule of thumb is to make a decision to **ACT THE OPPOSITE** of what negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression tell you to do. These negative emotions can lead to avoidance, giving up, procrastination, escape or numbing, isolation, passivity, aggressiveness, or chronic resentments, all of which harm you in the long run. Be vigilant for these unwholesome mind states. Then do the opposite, which is really what love would do.

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Instead of avoiding, lovingly engage. Instead of giving up, persist. Instead of procrastinating, pick one small step and complete it, then move on to the next step. Instead of escaping or numbing, counter your pain with your compassionate thought practice. Instead of isolating, connect with those who love and support you. Instead of being passive, be proactive. Instead of being aggressive, be kindly and firmly assertive. Instead of being resentful, cultivate forgiveness.

Schedule time in the week to take care of yourself, others, and your business. Schedule your priorities to increase the likelihood you will do them. Start with **your self-care as your highest priority** because you need to be vital to be of benefit to others.

Normally when there is a trigger or a threat, our default response is to negatively judge others or ourselves, sending us into a cycle of criticism, often directed at ourselves, which then leads to negative responses that then fuel further threat and negative judgments. As we awaken, we want to **replace this cycle of self-criticism with the “Cycle of Compassion”** in which we respond to threats with self-soothing like slow breathing along with loving awareness, which then trigger loving, compassionate responses. In this way we take care of ourselves, others and our business as effectively as possible and enable ourselves to create a life of love.

In Our Next Session

In our next session, we'll focus on showing compassion to others.

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In the meantime—between now and then, I encourage you to practice the following:

1. Continue your daily presence practice—both a period of silence, solitude, and stillness in the morning and your practice of stillness in motion through the day.
2. Start your day with a morning intention to love. You might want to recite a daily intention in the form of a prayer as in the dedication to love prayer we have been using at the end of our sessions.
3. Inquire deeply into your experience with a kind, curious eye, especially if you're in pain. Ask, "what is this?" and affirm, "this is sacred." Continue to let go of judgments as they arise.
4. Think about the triggers in your life that call the most for a compassionate response. Make a list of these triggers in your journal, your default response, and an alternative self-compassionate response.
5. Develop a compassionate image for yourself. What does it look like? Describe it in your journal.
6. Make a list of some compassionate things you could say to yourself.
7. Make a list of some compassionate things you can do for yourself, for others, and to tend to unfinished business?

Please take some time after our session today to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!