

Self Compassion

by Eunie Alsaker

This spring I noticed a common theme among the grief clients I saw in counseling. I heard comments such as: I don't know if I think about my mom often enough. I think about my friend all the time, and I shouldn't anymore. I should be further along than I am. I get frustrated with my brother and then feel so ashamed. It feels worse than before—what am I doing wrong? They all held some piece of the false belief that there is a “right” way to grieve, and they were doing it wrong. As I reflected on their self-judgments and considered ways to respond, I turned to the literature on self-compassion therapy. I found it helpful and have been incorporating it into my clinical work, as well as, if truth be told, my own personal life.

Self-compassion therapy is a fairly new topic in psychology, with the leaders first writing about it in the early 2000s. While little has been written directly on the intersection with grief, there is much for grief counselors to take from the ideas. Kristen Neff (2014) explains that self-compassion has three essential elements. Self-kindness is primary. This allows us to respond to our pain and shortcomings, perceived or real, with the same gentleness and understanding we extend to others. Secondly, it involves a recognition of our common humanity.

“Between the stimulus and response, there is a space.”

~ Victor Frankl,
Man's Search for Meaning

Believing that others have it figured out and we are doing it wrong leads to feelings of isolation. This compounds our pain, for we now also feel inadequate. Self-compassion recognizes the shared human experience of pain, suffering, and imperfection. Thirdly, Neff incorporates mindfulness into self-compassion. Because we cannot simultaneously ignore our pain and direct compassion toward it, she highlights the necessity of observing and acknowledging our painful emotions without immediately trying to fix the unfixable or push the feelings away. Resisting or denying suffering has the paradoxical impact of increasing it. Self-compassion reduces self-criticism and self-evaluation and increases an awareness that we are doing something incredibly difficult and that we are not alone in our pain. It allows for greater acceptance, not of the death itself, but of our pain in living with the loss.

Self-compassion therapy, as most orientations, combines previous fields. It uses elements from cognitive behavioral therapy but differs because it fundamentally offers more than alternative words and a logical response (Gilbert, 2009). It goes deeper and integrates kindness and gentleness, which allows space for greater healing. While similar to self-care, it goes beyond a mere “break” and incorporates a change in perspective. Self-compassion is positively correlated with an increase in resilience and happiness and a decrease in anxiety and depression. It has a role in more successful relationships.

Harsh self-judgement is something that many grievers engage in, and the encouragement to be kinder to themselves can leave them scratching their heads. Nice idea, but what does that even mean and how would I possibly do it? Though skeptical, they begin

to see that self-compassion is a skill set that can be learned.

While maybe our clients don't know how to be kind to themselves, most do know how to recognize when

others show compassion. They also most likely understand that within a relationship, judgment creates distance and compassion creates connection. Their friend/brother/therapist/doctor is kind. So, we ask, “What does that look like? What does it feel like to be in this person's presence? What do they say? How do they say it? What is it like to be accepted and not judged?” They also typically know how to be kind to someone else and accept another's experience with pain without judgment. We have them describe what compassion looks and sounds like, so they have a concrete picture to work from.

With a picture of compassion and an understanding of its impact, clients are in a better place to notice times of self-judgment and to develop a compassionate inner voice. Germer and Neff (2015) teach clients to stop when they notice negative intrusive thoughts and take a “self-compassion break.” They recommend the words, “This is a moment of suffering, may I be kind to myself,” (p. 53) followed by the physical response of putting hands on the heart and noticing one's breath. Physical touch is comforting for most, even when directed at oneself. Done repeatedly, this process can create a powerful shift. It allows for the awareness of pain and provides the reminder



that the goal of grief is not to avoid or fix, but to find nurturing ways to live with the pain.

A simultaneous place to start involves body work. When we respond to our pain with fear, judgement, or criticism, we activate the threat response, or the sympathetic nervous system. And when we respond to that pain with compassion, we release oxytocin and activate a calming response. So, part of self-compassion work is to equip clients with ways to calm their body and mind, so they are able to first feel safe, allowing access to a different response. In *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), Frankl writes, "Between the stimulus and the response, there is a space." Creating that space through breath work, grounding exercises, and anchoring activities/thoughts/music/physical objects sets the stage for success in shifting perception. It is a self-perpetuating loop. Physically calming oneself increases the ability to use kind words and compassion, which in turn relaxes the central nervous system.

In *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook*, Neff and Germer (2018) offer many practical suggestions for increasing self-compassion. I have chosen a few of my client's favorites.

- Write a monthly letter to oneself where both the difficulty of one's situation and one's strengths are acknowledged. Restate an on-going commitment to self-compassion and describe what this will look like.
- Establish an image of directing compassion or shooting love to the source of physical pain. With difficult emotions, kindness is directed to one's feelings. With judgmental or negating thoughts, kindness is directed to one's self-talk. Grief also lives in the body.

- Develop a practice of gratitude. Suffering is real, and that is not the only thing that is real. When grievors notice something of hope or love or a moment of peace each day, they are practicing compassion. It also is training the brain to be open to previously missed moments.
- Learn to ask, "What do I need right now?" Perhaps the answer is simply to sit with the pain. Or perhaps there is no answer at all. But asking the question gives the message that it is okay to notice what is needed, and it is okay to pursue it if possible.
- Consider ending a counseling session with a loving kindness meditation. Repeating the words, "May I be safe. May I be healthy. May I be loved. May I live in peace." sends a consistent message that these things are possible. Grievors can then use these words in response to self-judgment or other times when grief feels overwhelming.

Self-compassion is powerful. It allows grievors to step away from timelines and other false expectations, to have a way to actively care for themselves as they suffer, and to hold their grief in a new way. Anytime pain is met with compassion, healing is possible.

Resources

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Gilbert, P. (2009). *Introducing Compassion-Focused Therapy*. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 15(3):199-208.

Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2018). *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Neff, K. D. (YouTube) (2014, October 16). *The Three Components of Self-Compassion*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11U0h0DPu7k>.