



Compassion



Deborah Bircham

Health Coach, Mindfulness Teacher
Holistic and Naturopathic Wellness



QUALIFICATIONS:

- ✓ Naturopathic Nutrition and Health Coaching: *Diploma-College of Naturopathic Medicine (CNM)*
- ✓ Hypnotherapy and Psychotherapy: *Mindworks*
- ✓ Mindfulness Teacher: *Teach 10 Institute*
- ✓ *Certified IEMT Practitioner*

MEMBERSHIPS:

- ✓ National Council for Integrative Psychotherapists (NCIP)
- ✓ UK & International Health Coaching Association (UKIHCA)
- ✓ The Association of Naturopathic Practitioners (ANP)
- ✓ The Association of IEMT Practitioners

Socials: Live Well With Chronic Illness
Email: livewellwithchronicillness@outlook.com
Website: <https://livewellwithchronicillness.co.uk>

Specialise in Lyme
Disease, MCAS,
Dysautonomia and
Chronic Pain

Disclaimer



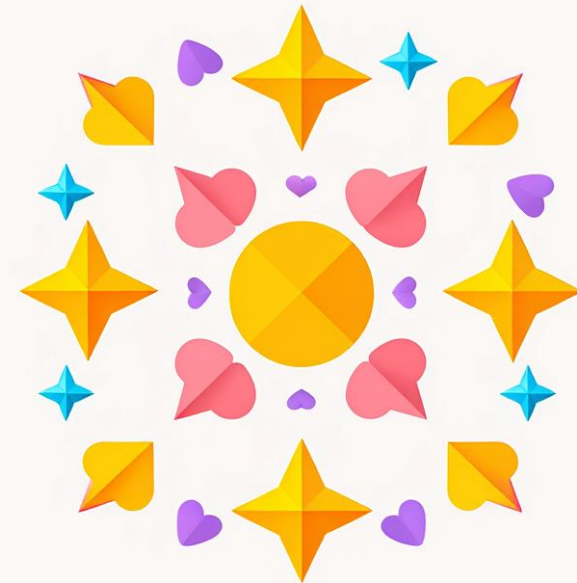
The information in this presentation is intended for information and educational purposes only.

It is not medical advice.

You should always consult your doctor about your own particular conditions, and ensure that you do your own research before making any changes to your diet.

I am not medically qualified, and this information is not a substitute for medical advice, or diagnosis.

Mast Cell Action and Live Well With Chronic Illness accepts no liability for any issues arising from actions taken as a result of the information presented here.



Compassion



When I say 'compassion', what does it mean for you?

What is compassion?



What is Compassion?



Compassion is a response to suffering

In order to feel compassion, we have to first confront suffering

Unlike kindness, or friendship, or love, compassion is inextricably connected with suffering



What is Suffering?



Suffering is the difference between what we wanted to happen and what has actually happened

Or what we perceive has happened

For suffering to occur, there is a gap, a difference, which causes emotional distress

We don't want to be unwell, but we find ourselves living with illness

We don't want to be in pain, but we find ourselves with pain



What is Suffering?



Suffering is an innate human experience

Suffering really is inevitable in human existence, because nothing ever works out perfectly for everyone!

Everyone experiences some form of suffering at some point in their lives

We try to push suffering away, we don't want it, we try to avoid it

Suffering is a taboo – we don't like to acknowledge it



What is Suffering?

When we push suffering away

When we fight against it

When we refuse to acknowledge it

It becomes more painful

It becomes shameful

Something to be hidden

Something not to be talked about

That makes suffering feel worse



What is Suffering?



By refusing to acknowledge suffering, we make it feel more painful

This frames suffering as 'something that shouldn't be happening'

The reality is that people are suffering, and that suffering is universal

Suffering is normal

By not talking about or acknowledging suffering, we make it seem abnormal, shameful

People feel alone in their suffering

People feel isolated by suffering

People feel as though they have to suffer in silence





The Two Arrows

In Buddhism, this concept is known as the 'Two Arrows'

The first arrow, painful experiences, is inevitable.

Everyone will experience loss, pain, worries

That is a normal state of life, that happens to us all.

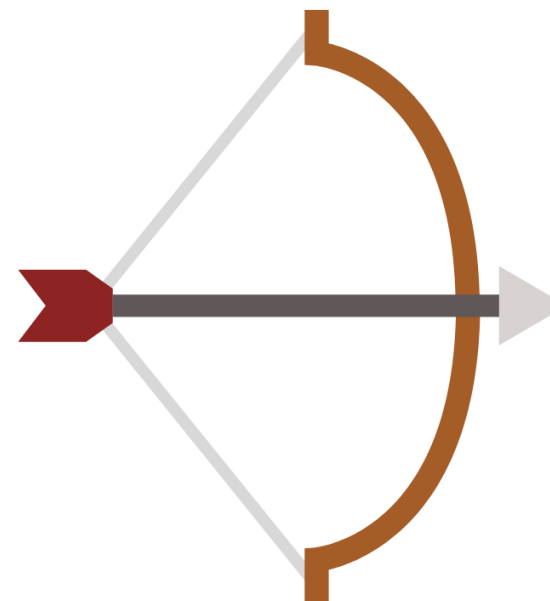
The second arrow, is the one we fire into ourselves

By resisting the suffering

By feeling ashamed of the suffering, embarrassed, guilty, fear
and anxious about the suffering

The desire to push suffering away and to hide it.

That creates a 'second pain' which is optional - we have some degree of
choice and control about that.



How does this relate to chronic illness?



When we live with chronic illness and pain, it's not just a physical issue.

Society rewards productivity and "pushing through"
Society shies away from acknowledging suffering

This creates grief, shame, frustration, guilt, isolation.

That creates more suffering
An emotional and mental toll, as well as a physical toll

This emotional side to illness affects our ability to heal,
and it also affects our identity, our sense of self-worth.

**CHRONIC
ILLNESS**



What is Compassion



Often described as -
Empathy + action

Empathy is passive – we feel sad for someone, but we are stuck in the feeling with them

Compassion is active – there is a desire to DO something, to alleviate the suffering, to move beyond the feeling into activity.



What is Compassion

Studies show that empathy, the ability to understand feelings, activates areas of the brain like the anterior insula and anterior middle cingulate cortex (aMCC), which are also involved in processing one's own pain and negative emotions.

These areas are associated with trauma – we feel their pain

Studies show that compassion – feeling concern and motivated to help - activates different areas of the brain, such as the medial orbitofrontal cortex (mOFC), subgenual anterior cingulate cortex (sgACC), and ventral striatum, associated with positive emotions like safety, connection, and well-being.



[https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982214007702#:~:text=\(C\)%20Empathy%20training%20\(in%20blue\)%20leads%20to,with%20permission%20from%20Klimecki%20et%20al.%20\(2013\).](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982214007702#:~:text=(C)%20Empathy%20training%20(in%20blue)%20leads%20to,with%20permission%20from%20Klimecki%20et%20al.%20(2013).)

<https://academic.oup.com/scan/article/9/6/873/1669505>



How can Compassion Help Us?



Reduces Stress Hormones

Self-compassion has been associated with **lower cortisol** levels, the primary stress hormone. Cortisol is elevated in chronic stress and can contribute to inflammation and immune dysregulation—especially problematic in chronic illness.

Study: Rockliff et al. (2008) found that imagining receiving compassion reduced cortisol and increased feelings of safeness and connection.



<https://repository.derby.ac.uk/item/94q17/a-pilot-exploration-of-heart-rate-variability-and-salivary-cortisol-responses-to-compassion-focused-imagery>



How Does Compassion Help Us?



Boosts Oxytocin – the “Bonding Hormone”

Compassion practices can increase **oxytocin**, which is linked with trust, emotional warmth, and reduced fear responses.

Oxytocin also supports parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) nervous system activity, promotes healing.

Study: Jorge A. Barraza, Paul J. Zak, 2009 Empathy toward Strangers Triggers Oxytocin Release and Subsequent Generosity

<https://nyaspubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04504.x>



How Does Compassion Help Us?



Engages the Parasympathetic Nervous System

Compassionate thoughts and feelings can activate the vagal nerve, which calms the heart and promotes a state of rest and repair.

Study:

Gilbert (2014) and Porges (2007) show that compassion-focused imagery and practices increase heart rate variability (HRV), a key marker of parasympathetic nervous system tone.

Jennifer E Stellar, et al, 2015, study showed compassion increased respiratory sinus arrhythmia, a measure of vagal tone.



<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17049418/>

<https://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2015-03026-001>



Compassion and Mental Health



Reduces Depression and Anxiety

Self-compassion helps people relate to their difficulties with kindness rather than harsh self-criticism, which is a major predictor of anxiety and depression.

Meta-analysis by MacBeth & Gumley (2012) reviewed 14 studies and found a strong inverse correlation between self-compassion and both anxiety and depression.

How? Self-compassion interrupts cycles of rumination and negative self-evaluation that fuel mood disorders.



<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22796446/>



Compassion and Mental Health



Shifts Brain Activity Toward Emotion Regulation

fMRI studies show that practicing self-compassion activates areas like the insula and anterior cingulate cortex, which are involved in emotional awareness and regulation.

At the same time, it reduces activity in the amygdala, the brain's fear and threat detection center.

Study: Longe et al. (2010) demonstrated that self-reassurance activates the soothing system in the brain, distinct from self-criticism.

Jacqueline Lutz et al 2021 self-reassuring or self-critical thoughts affected pain levels, and self-reassurance improves pain



<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1053811909009987>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8100920/>



Compassion Mental Health



Builds Resilience and Emotional Coping

People high in self-compassion are better able to cope with setbacks, chronic stress, and feelings of failure.

Study: Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat (2005) found that self-compassion predicted greater resilience and adaptive coping, particularly in academic and personal stress.

<https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=2161087>



Compassion and Mental Health



Supports Long-Term Mental Health Gains

Compassion-based interventions have been shown to reduce symptoms of PTSD, social anxiety, and burnout.

A randomized controlled trial by Jazaieri et al. (2013) found that an 8-week compassion cultivation training (CCT) significantly reduced social anxiety and increased self-esteem and mindfulness.



https://www.bodimojo.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Jazaieri_et_al_2012.pdf

What is Self-Compassion

Acknowledging our own suffering

Offering ourselves the same compassion we would give to others

WE are worthy of the same care as others

Treating ourselves, and speaking to ourselves, as we would speak to someone else



Empowerment



Regularly practicing self-compassion fosters resilience

It makes us better able to cope with difficulty

We can learn to comfort and soothe ourselves

No longer reliant on others for comfort

We can comfort ourselves through suffering

We can regulate our own experience even during difficulty

Rewiring neural pathways for coping with difficulty/trauma



What is Self-Compassion



3 elements of self-compassion, according to Kristen Neff

- Kindness vs judgement
- Common humanity vs isolation
- Mindfulness – vs overidentification

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11U0h0DPu7k>



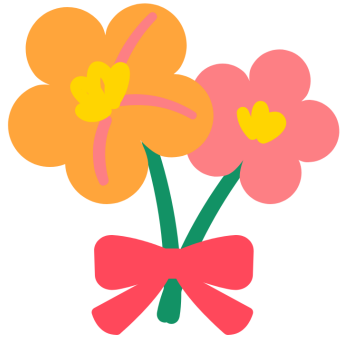
Self-Compassion Process



Acknowledge the suffering

Connection with others – I am not alone

Offer self kindness



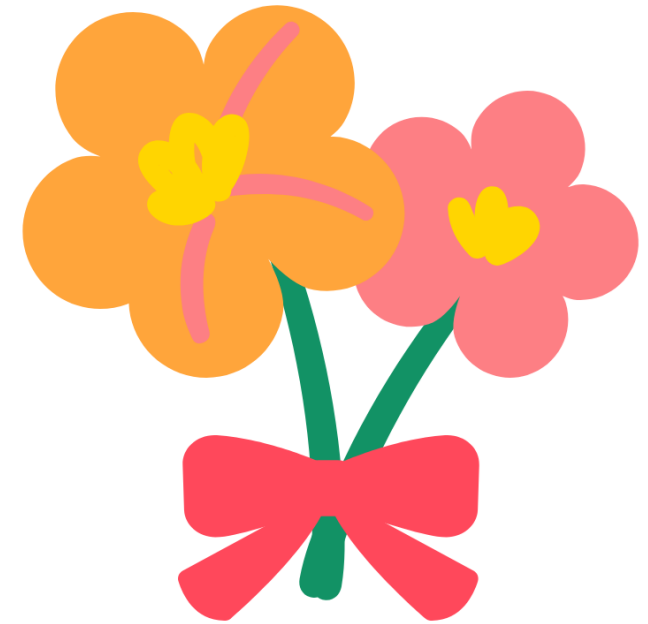
Practice



Self-Compassion Break

Kristen Neff

Feedback – how did you find that?



Self-blame



When we experience trauma or emotional distress or physical illness, we often turn inwards

Self-criticism

Shame

Blame

Self-anger

Isolation

Self-absorbed

Worthlessness



Antidote



Self compassion is the antidote to this

We can use this practice to reconnect to a sense of connection with others

We can acknowledge our experience

We can offer ourselves comfort

We can rewire our brains

We release oxytocin



Self-Compassion as a Healing Tool



Improves mental health (less anxiety, depression, and distress).

Reduces self-criticism, which can worsen pain perception.

Encourages sustainable self-care, not perfectionism.

Builds emotional resilience in the face of unpredictable symptoms or flares.

Fosters a more trusting, cooperative relationship with the body.

Triggers parasympathetic state – ‘rest and digest’ where healing occurs

Triggers release of oxytocin



What stops us from self-compassion?



Lack of confidence

Shame

Lack of deserving

Lack of self-worth

Self-Judgement/self-criticism

Conditioning of others which has been internalised –
we are not good enough

Self image, self esteem



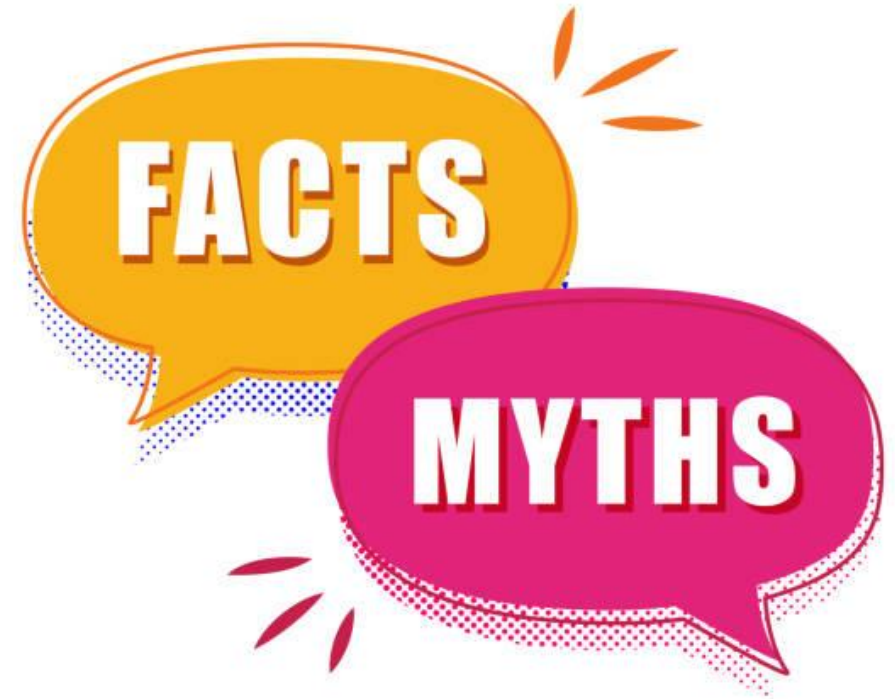
Myths about Self-Compassion



- That it's weakness
- That it's self-indulgent
- That it's self-pity
- That it's laziness
- That it's giving up

None of this is true!

- Self-compassion is a healthy and necessary part of looking after ourselves as adults
- We can regulate our own emotional state
- We can meet our own emotional needs
- It increases resilience and strength
- It promotes healing



How to Practice Self-Compassion



- Mindful self-talk during flares or setbacks.
- The "self-compassion break" (Neff's exercise).
- Journaling practices: "How would I speak to a friend?"
- Body scan meditations with compassionate intention-offering love and compassion to our own bodies.
- Setting boundaries and rest without guilt.
- Visualizations or affirmations rooted in kindness towards ourselves.
- Practice – it feels hard to begin with, it gets easier the more we do it!

"I am good enough as I am"



Compassion is not passive!

We don't just lie about all day saying 'I'm suffering, I can't help it'!

We take some time to offer ourselves compassion, before taking action

Our instinct is to rush into 'problem-solving mode' when faced with difficulty

Rumination, panic, I need to fix this – leads to bad choices and stress

When we take a few minutes to recognise the difficulty of the situation first, and give ourselves some compassion, we come at the problem-solving from a much more resourceful place.

Increased resourcefulness, wisdom, inner knowledge



Case Study



My client

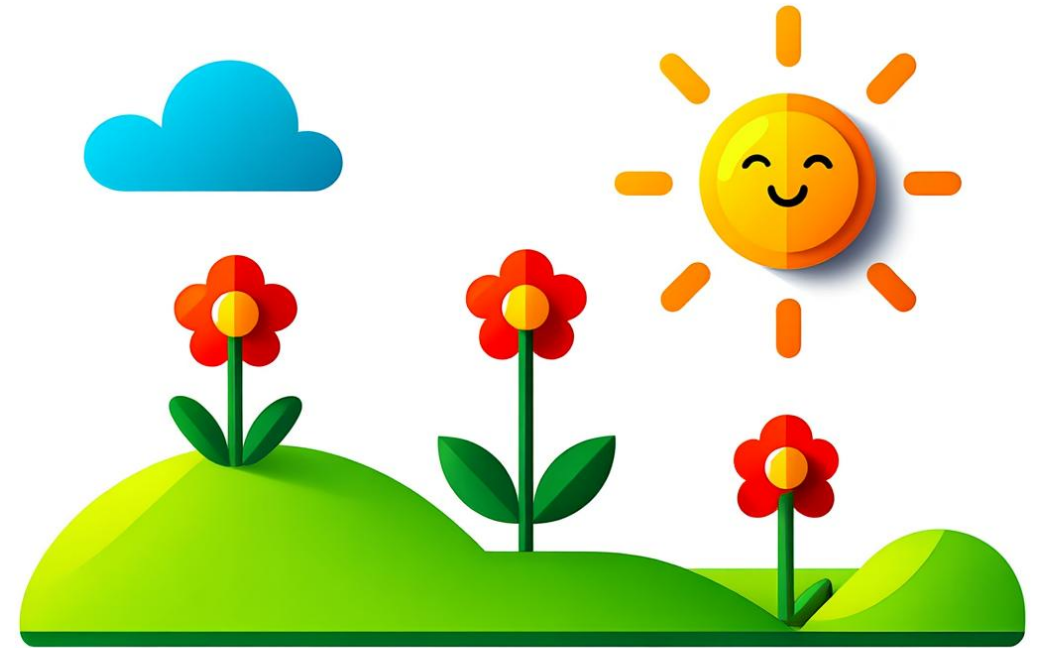
Long Covid, COPD, weight issues, severe breathing difficulty

Struggled to climb the stairs to bed at night

Stood at the top and berated herself every night

Self-compassion practice

Recovered quicker, less breathless



Contacts



Scan the QR Code to
subscribe to my Mailing
List



Contacts

Website <https://livewellwithchronicillness.co.uk/>



Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100088138430749>



Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/livewellwithchronicillness/>



YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/@LiveWellWithChronicIllness>



LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/deborah-bircham-08221866/>



Email livewellwithchronicillness@outlook.com



Telephone 01780 672505





The End

Thank you for Listening

