

**Training Our Minds in,
with and for Compassion**

**An Introduction to Concepts and
Compassion-Focused Exercises**

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Section One

Training Our Minds in Compassion: The Basic Model and Principles



Introduction

This booklet has been written for those who may be working individually with a compassion focused therapist or in a group. It can also be used by people who want to know more about the compassion focused approach for helping with difficult emotions and tendencies to be self-critical. More detailed writing on the compassion focused approach can be found in Paul Gilbert's book 'The Compassionate Mind'. This booklet is split into two sections. The first section offers an outline of a basic approach to thinking about the nature of, and value of, developing compassion in our lives. The second section explores some exercises that you can practise to try to stimulate your own compassionate mind.

First we will outline the basic model and approach to compassion that we will be following. This will explore how our brains work and what we mean by compassion. Now, of course, compassion training has been around for a long time, especially in Buddhist traditions, but here it is linked to some new ideas about how our brains work. We are going to start by looking at a couple of challenges that life presents us with and that we all experience.

Challenge number 1 - Dealing with our complex brains

I think many of us 'sort of realise' that we have a very *complex and difficult brain to deal with*. For example, we know that many of our difficult emotions and much of our suffering occurs because of how we *feel* in our bodies and in our minds. Most of us would rather feel happy than suffer and yet, even though we know it's our emotions and moods that are a source of our suffering, we can find it very difficult to steer our emotions and moods to feeling happier.

Now, there are many ways we can deal with this problem. One is just to carry on and hope that things improve. Another is to try to understand our minds better and see if we can train them and cultivate them so that our unpleasant emotions are easier to regulate, and our positive and pleasant emotions are easier to generate. A first step on this journey is to understand why our emotions can be so difficult and why this is not our fault. So let's begin to explore these questions. Now, one of the main reasons that we have a difficult and complex brain with a range of powerful emotions and urges is because of the way

our bodies and brains have *evolved over many millions of years*. For example, think about physical pain. We can experience pain if we get a headache, break a leg, or suffer from some major illness. Pain is part of our body's *natural* defence systems – it is there to alert us to things that might be wrong in the body that we need to pay attention to. Our capacity to feel pain is part of our evolved bodies and we share this with many other animals – even though at times it can be severe, excruciating and cause us major difficulties in life. As we have come to understand how pain was 'designed', what it is for, and how it works in us, we have learned how better to regulate it. The same is true with difficult emotions such as anxiety, anger or depression. This means that first we need to understand them, how they were designed by nature, for what purpose, and how they now work in us. This gives us an opportunity to then stand back from our motives and desires and recognise that these along with various emotions can flow through us, and affect how our body feels, in part because nature has designed them in a certain way. Let us more look more deeply into why we are motivated to do certain things and why we can feel certain emotions. Understanding ourselves better is the first step on the journey to being compassionate with ourselves.

We start with something that is not commonly recognised. That is the fact that we actually have two *different types of brain* in our head (some researchers even suggest we have three or four different types of brain!). How is that? Well we have an *old* brain that evolved many millions of years ago that does very similar things to other animals' brains. Indeed, for a moment, consider other animals and our relationship and connections to them. We have all emerged as part of the *flow of life* on this planet - we come from the same 'roots and stock' as it were. If we look at other animals such as rats and monkeys, and even some of those who live in the sea, such as dolphins, we can see they are *motivated* to achieve similar things as we are. First there are various *physical* things such as trying to keep safe and out of harm's way, finding enough food, not getting too hot or too cold. Many animals will, just like us, build places to live in – okay, there is a big difference between building a nest in a tree and building a four bed-roomed house! But being motivated to create a shelter and live in it is something that we share with many other animals. Second, many of our *social* behaviours and desires also have similarities with other animals. For example, we can observe them fighting and challenging each other for status and social position, having conflicts and making enemies, having sexual relationships, forming close friendships and bonds, caring for their children, answering distress calls, and clinging to each other when frightened. Sadly, chimpanzees have even been seen to engage in war like behaviour where one group attacks and kills other groups. Taken together, these are what we call *archetypal life patterns* - and they work in us too. If you read novels or go to the movies you'll see that most of what goes on is related to these social patterns - you will see heroes and villains, conflicts and people fighting with their enemies, sexual politics, family dramas, lusts and deceptions but also heroism, kindness caring and compassion.

In addition to these basic physical and social desires and motives that had been built into us by nature, we also have a range of *emotions* for dealing with successes and setbacks in our plans, goals and desires. As we will note in a moment – when we are threatened, anxiety can flush through our bodies; if we are thwarted, we can feel frustration and anger; and if we experience a loss of things or people we value, we can be plunged into sadness. Everyone who has pets will be in no doubt that your animals can feel these things too - to different degrees of course, and in different ways, but a key point is that, like them, we have brains have that have been built to experience these emotions.

So our first key idea then is that we did not design our brains nor the desires and motives nor the capacity for certain emotions. Therefore much of what goes on in our mind is linked to its design and is not our fault. The fact is that many of our emotions, our tendencies for anger and anxiety, our desires to be loved, cared for and respected, or trying hard to avoid being rejected and criticised, are built into our old brains.

However, we do differ from other animals, of course, because of how we can think and having a sense of self. How did that come about? And what does it mean to be able to think and have a sense of self? Well it turns out that around two million years ago the human brain evolved a number of abilities for thinking in new ways. We became able to *imagine* and fantasise things; to think, reason and plan in ways that other animals cannot. We have a type of consciousness and sense of self that other animals do not have. We can think about the future and the kind of self we want to be, how we want to feel, the life we want, or we can look back with regret and ruminate about happy or unhappy things, whereas other animals live primarily day to day.

We can refer to these new abilities as being part of our *new brain and mind*. These new brain abilities use our attention, imagination and ability to fantasise, think and reason. Our new brain abilities have made the world what it is today with cultures, science, cars, TV's, mobile phones and medicine, but, and this is a *big but*, these new brain abilities can also cause us serious problems and distress. For example, we can reason about conflicts and plan revenge, we can use our intelligence to work out how to build horrible weapons. We can ruminate on how unhappy we are, or we can create in our heads a sense of self as inferior and unloved. We can develop a self-identity that focuses on winning or proving our strength, or always being submissive.

Basically, our new brain capacities can be hijacked and directed by old brain passions, desires, threats and fears. Our planning, reasoning, imagining, and ruminating can be directed by the emotions and motives of the old brain. Rather than using our thinking and attention to control unpleasant emotions or help us stimulate positive emotions, the old brain pulls us in the direction of threat-based anxiety and anger, and this becomes the focus of our thinking, feeling and imagining. Diagram 1 below uses a hand drawn brain to outline this in a straightforward way.

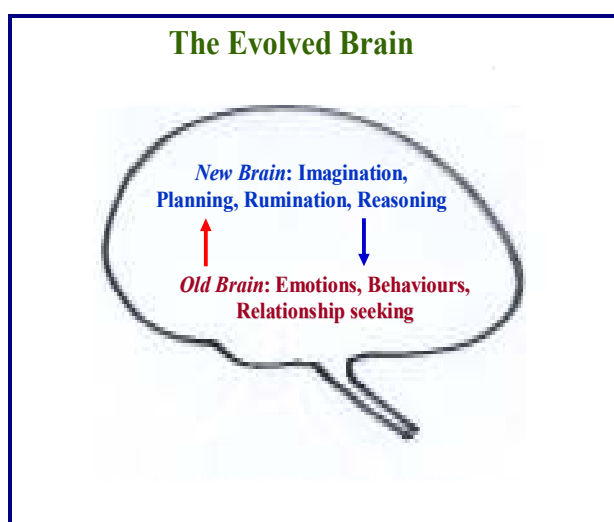


Diagram 1: Interactions between the old and new brains

You will see that the arrows go in both directions. Let's consider some examples to see this more clearly. Imagine that somebody at work really annoys you, maybe you don't like them that much – what happens in your mind? Your old brain systems which create anger that flows through your body and directs your thoughts actions and urges might be activated. Then you may find your mind *thinking* about them and wondering how to get your own back? Your mind, with its complex capacities for thinking, planning and reasoning, has been 'pulled in to service' the desire for revenge! You will also know that the more you ruminate about your anger, the more angry you may become. Or to put this another way - our capacities and feelings for vengeance have taken over our thinking abilities and urges. Here's another example. Imagine that tomorrow you have an important interview or examination. The chances are the anxiety of either of those could take a hold of your thinking and attention and you'll find your mind keep coming back to what you have to do tomorrow. Will you be okay? Will you succeed or make mistakes? And so on. So you see that some of our motivations and emotions (e.g. anger or desire to do well) fire up our body with feelings, fill us with urges for action, and *direct* our attention, reasoning and thinking. We sometimes feel we can't control these things, so we just go with the flow don't we. It's like finding ourselves in a canoe on a fast moving river. The more you ruminate about your anxiety and dwell on your fears and how terrible it will be if you fail, the more anxious you will become.

The good news is that we can learn to stop and notice this process by which our emotions and motivations have taken hold of our thinking. We can learn to stand back and become more observant of our brains built in desires and emotions that flow through us, and then make a decision as to whether we want to go with that flow or maybe change the direction of our thinking or attention. This is called becoming 'mindful', as we will explore in Section Two. In compassion focused work the idea is to notice how our minds can be taken over by emotions that are not always very helpful to us and can make us feel bad. We can feel held there, as if by powerful magnets, but we can also learn to notice this and deliberately refocus our thoughts and attention on things *that are helpful* to us. We find ourselves in that canoe on a fast moving river but now we have a paddle. So we can also try to generate helpful emotions, such as compassion, that will help us with our feelings of anger or anxiety. Now these are not new ideas, and in fact we can trace them back to Buddhist concepts over 2,500 years ago. However, as we learn to be more compassionate with ourselves and others, it's very helpful to stand back from what goes on in our minds and recognise one key element in all this – something we have mentioned before.

We did not choose to have a brain like this – we did not choose to have the capacities for anger or anxiety – we did not choose to have a brain where it is so easy for anger and anxiety to take hold of our thinking. We will look at this in the section on 'understanding emotions'. One thing is clear - *much of what goes on in our minds is not our fault*. It is not our fault because our capacities for powerful desires (like love, sex, status and belonging) and our emotions (such as anger, revenge, anxiety and depression) were built by evolution over millions of years. *We didn't choose to build them like this!* So a key issue is how we can learn to stop blaming ourselves for what we feel or how we're reacting, become aware that this is the working of a brain that's been designed *for us*, but that we can take more responsibility for our minds so that we don't just end up in that canoe being rushed along on rivers of desires, disappointments, passions or emotions.

However, we mustn't be too one sided here, and only focus on unpleasant emotions, because our brains have also evolved great capacities for enjoyment and happiness, for caring and peacefulness. These are

as much part of how our brains are designed as are anger and anxiety. In fact, if you look around the world you'll see many animals caring for their babies and each other. There is a lovely video showing playful, affectionate interactions between a dog and a orang-utan – helping us see that these capabilities and enjoyments have also evolved and operate in the brains of animals:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/09/26/orangutan-and-hound-dog-b_n_299010.html

Kindness has evolved to be especially important for humans because from the day we are born to the day that we die the kindness of others will have a big impact on us - as will our own kindness for ourselves. Most of us also like to be helpful to people - particularly if they appreciate us. In today's world that seems so full of tension, anxiety and anger, it's so easy to forget that within our brains are mechanisms which motivate us, and enable us, to be kind and helpful to others and kind to ourselves. If we find that difficult then we have to learn how to use our new brain abilities (for thinking and so on) to tune into our innate capacity for caring kindness and compassion and organise our minds in new ways. As we will see later, these parts of our brain can help us to feel better in ourselves and more at peace and content and this, of course, is the point of Compassionate Mind Training.

When we look at our minds and brains in this way we can see that a lot of what goes on in them has actually been designed *for us*, not *by us*. This leads us to our second challenge - the challenge of how we all *just find ourselves here* with this difficult and, at times, emotionally overwhelming brain to have to deal with.

Challenge number 2 - Just finding ourselves here

We start with the reality that is true for all of us, which is that we all just 'find ourselves here'. We did not choose to be born, nor the genes that made us, nor the kinds of emotions and desires that often operate within us. We did not choose our basic temperaments – some of us are born more shy and anxious, active or passive than others. Some of us will be bright and discover we have talents in sport or music, others of us less so. We did not choose to be born into a loving, neglectful or abusive family; into a Christian, Muslim or Atheist family; into a rich or poor family. We did not choose to be born in our particular town, in this time in history. Yet, all of these will have a profound effect on how we come to experience and feel about ourselves and our core values. We all just 'find ourselves here'. We are all in the same boat.

We become aware of 'being here', that we exist as a 'feeling self' when we are around two to three years old. As we grow up our brains mature quickly and we become capable of understanding new things - thanks to the brain changes. As we enter adolescence we discover hormones are changing our bodies, desires and interests. We choose none of this, it just happens inside of us. Emotions seem to intensify; we become more easily shamed and sensitive, especially about our bodies; we become more interested in winning the approval and acceptance of our peers and develop specific interests, such as types of music, clothes or style. I wanted to be a rock star (well, still do actually). Later we want to find partners with whom we can have long-term relationships with, the possibility of sharing our genes and having children. All of us want to be valued and appreciated and accepted, rather than devalued, criticised, taken for granted or rejected. However, we choose none of these desires or emotions, they are simply part of our makeup, how our brains evolved.

How others treat us and care for us, and how we learn to deal with these unfolding experiences, can make a big difference as to how our brain grows and how we learn to cope with this *difficult brain* that evolution has given us, and our vulnerabilities to things like anger, anxieties or depression. As we grow up then, we are gradually discovering that our minds have all kinds of feelings and passions which sometimes take control over us. We act according to how our feelings direct us. If we're angry we may say or do hurtful things; if we're anxious we may try to avoid things or behave very submissively, thus not learning how to cope with the things that frighten us. The fact that we have a brain that has these capacities is *absolutely not our fault*.

The point is that if we inherit a range of difficult emotions and desires, and our brains and minds are shaped by those around us (none of our choosing), it may help us if we can learn about our brains and minds then the greater our chances are of learning how to direct or calm these feelings rather than them directing us. We can then learn how to *train* our minds in order to maximise the chances of understanding and coping with unpleasant emotions, and increase helpful and pleasant ones. This will help us to create a sense of well-being and to flourish. . If you want to play a musical instrument you need to learn about your instrument, what notes are, what the scales are, and then practice. If you want to be good at sports you need to understand the rules of the game, the key moves and tactics and then practice. It is absolutely no different with our minds and our brains, practice is the key. As we will see, developing compassion is one road to this. Compassion for ourselves and others helps us deal with many of our more unpleasant feelings such as anxiety, anger, and even despair.

Understanding Motives and Emotions

Now as you are recognizing our basic *old brain* emotions can cause us real difficulties, as they are designed to be very powerful and can be very tricky to handle. Our emotions were probably slightly easier to deal with when we lived in close, small communities and villages because we felt more secure in our relationships than we can do today. Emotions often give us intermediate feedback on how our motives of doing. For example, as we'll see shortly, we have emotions that are focused on threats to ourselves and goals and efforts for self-protective behaviours. Generally these emotions feel *unpleasant* to us because they're directing us towards threats and the need to do something. However, we also experience emotions that are positive and pleasant. These are emotions that are linked to feeling successful and achieving our goals, or feeling content. How we attend to our emotions, and our thoughts and reasoning about our emotions, and the situations that might stir them up, can do much to calm us down or make things worse for us. We will be looking at this later.

Our emotions evolved to help us spot things, particularly things that are threatening, and do something about them. Generally, if things are going well, we feel positive emotions but if they are not then we can feel unpleasant emotions. To help us understand this we can look at the types of the emotions we have and what they are designed to help us think and do. For example:

* *Anger* is an old, defensive emotion. Anger and frustration can arise from many sources, such as feeling thwarted and blocked (losing one's car keys just before one has to dash off to an important

meeting!), or it can arise from a sense of injustice or feeling criticized and put down by other people. Anger makes us want to approach the problem, do something about it, 'sort it out'. Anger can also make us want to retaliate against another person if he or she has upset us or upset someone we love. When anger gets going our bodies *feel* a certain kind of way; our minds focus on and *attend* to things that annoy us. We have certain types of *thoughts* that go with anger. Spend a moment considering your own thoughts when you become angry with someone ('how could they ...how dare they... how bad they are....'). It will also make us want *to behave* and do things in certain kinds of way ('I'll show them.....'). Maybe we want to shout, swear, be aggressive, try to get our own back or withdraw. So we see that this important emotion of anger can direct our bodily feelings and emotions, our attention, our thoughts (and the things we dwell on and go over and over in our minds) and urge us to behave in certain kinds of ways. Consider the particular things in your life that trigger anger for you; we all have our buttons that can be pushed. Notice how anger pulls on all those aspects in you in certain ways - almost like a whirlpool.

* **Anxiety** is another very important and basic defensive emotion which is focused on threats; it gives us a sense of urgency, prompting us to do something. Anxiety can make us want to run away and keep ourselves safe and out of harm's way. When anxiety gets going it pulls our thinking to focus on dangers and threats. Again we see that this important emotion of anxiety can direct our bodily feelings and emotions, our attention, our thoughts and behaviour. Like anger, there will probably be certain things in your life that tend to make you anxious. As with all emotions, we need to stop and think if we want to be dominated by these primitive emotions, to recognise them for what they are – basic brain programmes – and learn to ride them in different ways.

* **Disgust** feels different from anxiety and anger. It makes us want to expel noxious substances or turn away from them. Our facial expressions, when we experience disgust, differ from anger and anxiety. Disgust was originally designed to keep us away from toxic substances, and is commonly linked to bodily reactions to things. When disgust blends with anger we can have contempt. So again we see that this important emotion can direct our bodily feelings and emotions, our attention, our thoughts, and can urge us to behave in certain kinds of ways.

* **Shame** is usually a blend of other emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and disgust. It is an emotion that is specifically linked to a sense of ourselves. Typically, shame makes us want to run away, or close down and be submissive in order to avoid rejection. We can have a sense of shame if we think others look down on us or see us as inferior in some way. Sometimes we express shame with anger and criticism of others. For example, Sue makes a critical comment about John eating too many chips and putting on weight. He has a flush of anger and says, "Well given your cooking, can you blame me!" This automatic response is linked to an underlying emotional sensitivity about his weight because he himself feels bad about his weight. He shames Sue because he has been shamed. Our minds do this very easily and without a lot of thought, it is part of our brain quickly shifting to self-defence. Shame is also linked to how we think and feel about ourselves. John could have responded differently. He might have gone quiet, or felt a little depressed and ruminated on the fact that his weight is unattractive, and he's struggling to control his eating. And, of course, both the angry/defensive and the depressive responses are possible. So, again we see that shame can direct our bodily feelings and emotions, our attention, our thoughts and urge us to behave in certain kinds of ways.

* **Guilt** makes us wary of exploiting or harming others, and prompts us to try and repair the relationship if we do. People often confuse shame with guilt, but guilt is much more about wanting to

avoid hurting others and being prepared to make amends if we do. So, for example, Sue might reflect that John was hurt by her comment and John might reflect that he had been unkind to Sue. These are guilt responses. Both might then apologise, acknowledging that their comments were in the heat of the moment. Ideally they might then think about how to tackle the problem together. In shame the focus of our attention is on ourselves (as a bad, unattractive or flawed person) and what other people think about us, whereas in guilt it's about our behaviour/actions and how we can repair any hurt we might have caused - we do not necessarily see ourselves as bad but we want to make amends for our behaviours. In guilt we reach out with our hearts and feel sorrow; in shame we withdraw and feel fear, disgust or anger. The key point is that, again, we see that guilt can direct our bodily feelings and emotions, our attention, our thoughts and behaviour.

What about positive emotions? What functions do they have?

While we have focused on negative emotions, which focus of threats and self-protection, there are also a range of positive emotions which direct us towards things that are helpful to us.

* **Excitement:** This is an emotion that is energising and directs us towards certain things. We generally feel excited about something we want to do or achieve. We can also have a buzz of pleasure when we do achieve it. If something major happens, such as winning a lottery and become a millionaire, the system can go into overdrive. You might have racing thoughts; your body may feel accelerated; you're very excited and you might have trouble sleeping. Such amazing things don't often happen, of course, but smaller things do. Small buzzes of pleasure can come from small achievements, you may be invited to a party with your friends, or you get offered a job, or someone you have wanted to date accepts your invitation. We can even get these feelings if (say) our child does well or our beloved football team wins the championship. The downside, however, is that if we constantly seek excitement, or become dependent on the feelings linked to achieving or praise to feel good, this can lead us to wanting more and more. We find that our pleasant feelings may evaporate if we are not achieving, succeeding or feeling praised and valued. We find the goalposts for pleasure keep moving, and what satisfied us years ago may no longer do so.

* **Contentment:** This is a very different positive emotion to that of excitement. It gives us a sense of being at peace and of well-being. Contentment helps us stop driving ourselves and wanting to achieve all the time. This allows us to rest. Interestingly, it's not an emotion that Western societies focus on very much, but as we'll see shortly it's key to well-being. Learning to be content, learning to focus on the things that you like, and are happy with, in the here and now, can be very important and counteract the tendency to always think of how you want more or to do better.

* **Love and affection:** These are emotions that indicate positive relationships between people and tell our brain that we are safe. When we feel safe with other people and know we can turn to them for help this tones down the threat system. These feelings help us build bonds, and think about each other when we are not currently in sight. When we feel cared about, this can help us experience the important positive feelings of safeness and openness to those around us. Learning to be sensitive and caring of ourselves can also help us feel more positive in the world.

Now, these positive emotions ideally work best when they are in balance as we will see. Also, each of them operates in the way that can direct our bodily feelings and emotions, our attention, our thoughts and behaviour. Again, like anger or anxiety, there will probably be certain things in your life that tend to

trigger positive emotions in you.

Some key questions for us to ponder

Now look at the list of emotions, think of each emotion and ask yourself: “What does your body want to do if this emotion is aroused in you? How does this emotion direct your attention, the things that come up from your memory, what is the train of your thinking? How does your thinking differ if you are angry, anxious, or in love?” Now, the \$64,000 question here is: Are you thinking for yourself or are your emotions thinking for you? If we are honest we often get caught up in an emotion and the emotion directs our thinking. Sometimes we haven't learnt how to stand back and not get caught up in the whirlpool and dragged into the emotion. The emotion says ‘think this’, ‘dwell on this’, ‘fret about that’ and we simply do, but of course it is also a two-way street. How we think about things, the interpretations and meanings we put on to things that happened to us, can also stir and inflame our emotions. But we might also choose to use our new brain abilities, which allow us to stand back, think and reflect, to help us calm down - by shifting our attention and re-focusing on things that are helpful.

Emotions, then, have *certain functions*, even if they are unpleasant and painful to us. We sometimes call threat-focused *self-protective* emotions (such as anxiety or anger) negative or bad. However, this puts us in the wrong frame of mind for dealing with them. These are not negative emotions simply because they feel bad, they are part of our self-protection system. Once we start to befriend them, we will find they are easier to deal with. Also, there are many good reasons for feeling bad. Imagine what a person would be like who did not have the capacity to feel anger, fear, disgust, shame or guilt. These emotions are part of our being; they have evolved as part of our human nature. *But remember we did not choose to have these emotions; they have been building and evolving over many millions of years.*

We live in a world which stresses the importance of happiness and feeling good. The problem is that you can be led astray by some of these claims because they don't also tell you that feeling bad is, at times, a normal, important, part of life, and in the long term can be good for you. Anxiety about failing your exam may make you study hard, or anxiety about certain areas of the town will keep you away from them. It is learning to balance our emotions that is important.

Consider too that if someone we love dies; we can find ourselves in a deep state of grief, which is naturally very unpleasant, with its associated sleep problems, crying, pining, anger and feelings of emptiness. We might have learned to share these feelings or to keep a stiff upper lip, but there is, in most of us, a potential grief state of mind. As another example, we all have the potential for aggressive, vengeful fantasies and attitudes: if someone harmed your child, your inner desire for revenge could be intense, and, of course, we all have the potential for feeling anxious. All these possible emotions are in our genetic blueprint, and there are genetic and developmental differences among us that affect just how easily or intensely these emotions can be triggered in each one of us.

The importance of thinking

Buddhists for over 2,500 years, and more recently psychotherapists (especially cognitive therapists), have drawn attention to the way we think and mull over things in our mind. It's very common for us to all have immediate reactions to certain things. The question is how we then respond to those reactions in our bodies. For example, supposing you're in a rush and you get in your car and the car won't start.

There is a wonderful episode in a programme called *Fawlty Towers* where John Cleese is trying to get somewhere urgently and the car breaks down. He becomes very angry, takes it personally (“how could you (the car) do this to me now”) swears at the car (“you bastard!”) and even hits it with a branch. We love these programmes because we can see this in ourselves to some degree or other! So our anger can be understandable but we can get carried away with it. Of course the thing to do is to recognise one’s anger is understandable, be kind to it, but then as quickly as possible switch one’s thinking to the best coping option. For example, getting a taxi or phoning a friend or car breakdown etc. People who struggle to cope tend to get so caught up with their anger and are not very good at generating helpful coping options - and so can feel defeated, hopeless, depressed and that the world’s against them.

Another problem with that thinking is called *rumination* where we find it difficult to refocus our minds on things that are helpful to us. For example, if someone has upset you, you might ruminate on that for days, going over in your mind about how unfair it was and whether you should have been more assertive. Chances are you’ll go over the same territory again, and again, and again, and again, and..... It’s the same with many problems in our lives if we’re honest – we can live in places in our minds which are not helpful because we keep thinking about unpleasant things. Think about what’s happening in your brain when you’re ruminating on things that are unpleasant to you. You will be stimulating areas of the brain that are not helpful to you. In a little while we’re going to look at how to be mindful and recognise when we are ruminating, how to make choices about whether to engage with it or not, and how to refocus in a compassionate way.

Emotional Learning and Body Memories

Our brains and bodies are set up to learn how to respond emotionally to things. We call it conditioning. When my daughter was young she was interested in dogs. Then one day one jumped up at her, frightening her. After that she was more anxious about dogs. If large dogs approached she’d have an automatic anxious feeling (keep in mind this did not happen until after the experience of the dog jumping up at her), so it was a *learned anxiety* and operated by flushing anxiety rapidly through her body. Imagine that you enjoy your beer or wine, and then one day at a party you have a drink and you are very ill. After a week or two, you are feeling better and get invited to another party. As you enter the room someone puts a pint of beer in your hands and you smell the hops. What do you think happens in your body? Just the sight or smell of it can stimulate the same feelings and that sense of nausea. Your face shimmers with disgust and you say ‘no thanks, the smell makes me feel sick’. *Your body remembers* and flushes you with the same feelings you had, as if to say ‘don’t drink – remember this sick feeling’. We can call this *body memory* because it’s so automatic. Body memories can give rise to what we call our ‘gut reactions’ to things with little thought.

The way our bodies learn to react quickly and emotionally to things is of course complex but, once again, we can see that *emotional learning is not our fault*. It is not our fault that our body experiences nausea at the sight or the smell of beer a few days after we felt sick from drinking some. Even if our logical minds tell us that we were just unlucky to have drunk a bad pint previously, we can still have the feelings again. Similarly, feeling anxious or angry can flush through us before we have had a chance to think much about what is happening to us.

Also, when we do start thinking, sometimes our thoughts and feelings don't always agree. Indeed this is very common. Many of the things that make us anxious we may know in our hearts are not that frightening. We can be frightened at the movies even if we 'know' they are just acting; we can be frightened of spiders even if we 'know' they are not dangerous. If we learn to be compassionate and recognise that our feelings are coming from our emotional brains, we can treat them with compassion, and act against them sometimes, this can move us forward and we can retrain ourselves. As we will see, we have to make the decision to do that though.

We can also develop fears in situations that *are* dangerous or hurtful and harmful. For example, imagine a child's parent is often angry and calls them stupid. The child experiences the parent as threatening and dangerous, there will be arousal of panic/fearful emotions within the child, and these emotions will be associated with the words the parent uses (e.g. 'stupid'). Note too that the child cannot just run away or escape, so in that moment the child may *feel trapped and that no one will rescue them*. Another key emotion that follows on from the sense of 'no rescue' is feeling very alone. Fear, a sense of entrapment *and* aloneness are all emotional experiences being programmed into the child's brain. If this happens repeatedly that programming will become more fixed. So what do you think happens later in life when the child, who is now an adult, is criticised? They may well have a flush of these difficult emotions – that sense of shame, feelings of entrapment and aloneness/no rescue. These feelings may be overwhelming and complex. These are like body memories with feelings flushing through the person because of their original experiences. To cope with these complex feelings the person might react in an angry way or withdraw, or even self-harm, but we can see that that is not their fault. It is tragic and sad, but not their fault. Our emotions can be overwhelming at times because of things in the past.

So there can be many areas in our lives where we have learnt to be frightened, ashamed or distrusting because of the way people have treated us or reacted to us. Note too that we can also learn to treat ourselves unkindly. A child who is often told off for making mistakes and called stupid may well, over time, develop *that reaction to themselves* if they make mistakes. That is, they have a flush of feeling stupid and tell themselves they are stupid. This is also a type of emotional learning. They may even 'know' in their heads that they are not stupid but still *feel it* because of the emotional memories. The child wasn't born like that; his or her brain is simply repeating feelings from memory and adopting the attitudes of others.

The Problems with Protection and Safety Strategies

Although we can see difficult emotions as problems and things to be got rid of, they were actually designed by evolution to defend us and help us – especially when we are threatened. As we go through life we actually develop all kinds of ways of picking up on, and responding to, threats that can be linked to our early experiences and ways in which we learnt to try to protect ourselves. For example, children who have aggressive, competitive or dominant parents may become very submissive. In conflict situations they back down because the body remembers how they used to be overwhelmed by the parent if they tried to fight back in the past. Or they may ruminate on feelings of resentment. They may even become aggressive themselves. We call these *protective or safety behaviours and strategies*. They are very understandable and often rapidly activated. They are the way the body has learnt to try to protect itself. That is absolutely not our fault because usually they just developed in us without much

thought on our part. However, they have a huge disadvantage – they can have unforeseen and undesired consequences. For example, they may stop us learning new ways of dealing with difficult situations. This is because safety learning tends to use the same strategies in a variety of situations. As a result, because of our tendencies to be submissive, self-blaming or aggressive, we cut ourselves off from possible sources of good things. Again, this is not our fault. Let's look at some examples of how we can develop safety and defensive strategies and behaviours for very good reasons, but that these often then cause problems (see Table 1).

Background experiences	Key fears	Safety/defensive strategies	Unintended and unhelpful consequences
The Case of Kim: Mother was critical and father was absent	Being criticised by others, feeling inadequate. Fear of others getting too close to me in case they don't like me	Try to please people, work out what they want; hide feelings that could upset people	Keep distance, don't share thoughts and feelings, So don't realise other people can feel the same way I do. Stay lonely and not able to learn from others. Become self-critical very easily upset
The case of John: Loving parents but they were very busy and rarely had time for me. No-one to discuss emotions with, no-one to show an interest in me (e.g., Come to school plays)	People will have things they need or want to do rather be with me. Not important enough. Feeling lonely	Try to make myself important but aloof. Tend to overwork and over commit myself – just like my parents. Creating these demands on me show I am wanted, needed or worthy. Keep my own needs at a minimum because they won't be met. Keep busy then I don't feel things too badly; don't have to think.	Emotional needs stay undeveloped. Get exhausted and then irritable and then feel worse. Don't work on intimate relationships so loneliness is not going improve. Often don't know what would what make me 'content' and at peace with myself and life – because all I know is work.
The case of Sara: Often felt a bit different to others like I didn't fit in. Experienced bullying in schools and also quite controlling parents	Being under other people's control. Being vulnerable to other people's criticism.	Find things I can control like my eating. The more I control that and my urges to eat the more in control I feel. Prove I have a strong will	Distractions from the real emotional problems; feelings of control are powerful but illusory. Very easy to feel out of control because I have not learned how to be comfortable with my emotions or productively assertive. Can't develop and work on a sense of myself (likes and dislikes) because food is too much the focus of my life.

Table 1: Examples of safety and defensive strategies and behaviours and some unintended consequences

These examples show that we can find our minds reacting quickly to things because of our (early) fears, threat and ways we have learnt to protect ourselves - *and this is not our fault*. So what can we do? We can learn to step back from our first reactions and learn to think about them in different ways. We can develop the habit of learning to stop before acting on first reactions. Learning to stop and really notice and attend to what is going though our minds is a first step to having more control. Learning how to be

compassionate to our feelings, rather than fighting with them or trying to avoid them, is the next step. This is what we will be exploring in the exercise section.

Before this, though, I'm going to show you how compassion may really help you deal with complex emotions and your sense of yourself. If we practice compassion we can even change our brains. It turns out that we have systems in our brain that make compassion possible and by developing compassion we can organise our minds in new ways. This is supported by important, recent and exciting research.

The Three Circles Model: The Interactions between Different Types of Emotion

We have looked at the types of feelings we can have and what they were designed to do. We also looked at how different feelings direct our attention, thinking and behaviour in different ways. However, what we did not look at is how feelings *interact*. For example, if you are in a good mood you are more likely to cope with minor frustrations than if you are in a bad mood. Now, to help us think about how our emotions *interact* and why and how compassion can affect and balance other emotions I'm going to outline a model that admittedly is quite simplistic (and things are more complex of course) but this simplicity is actually very helpful.

Our *experiences* of emotions and desires emerge from *the patterns* they create in our brains and bodies. If you are having one type of thought or feeling, one pattern of 'an array of many millions of brain cells' will light up in your brain, but when you feel differently a different pattern and array will be activated. As we will see, when we work on the exercises in Section Two, we may be able to take more control over the 'brain patterns' that emerge in us. Below, Diagram 2 outlines three interacting systems.

This is a simplified view of what are, of course, multi-component and complex systems in our brains, but thinking in terms of these three systems can offer a helpful framework for exploring how our brain gives rise to different feelings, desires and urges such as anger, fear, excitement, various desires and lusts, and compassion. So, let us look briefly at each of these in turn.

1. Threat and Self-protection System: The function of this is to pick up on threats quickly and then give us bursts of feelings such as anxiety, anger or disgust. These feelings will ripple through our bodies alerting us and urging us to take action against the threat, to self-protect. Its effect will be to *activate* us to run or fight, or *inhibit* us so that we freeze or submit, or stop doing things. It will also be activated if there are threats to people we love, our friends or our family. Although it is a source of painful and difficult feelings (e.g. anxiety, anger, disgust) keep in mind that it evolved as a *protection* system. In fact, you might be surprised to learn that our brain gives *more* priority to dealing with threats than with pleasurable things. Your threat system is your basic 'fall back system' – *the easiest of all to feel and trigger*. There are many brain areas that make up our threat and protection system, but the main thing to be aware of is that it gives us *our bodily feelings*, i.e. the racing heart or stomach butterflies, or, if we feel disgust, the nausea that can sweep through us. Indeed, we might feel emotions in our bodies before we consciously realise we are having a feeling. If someone jumps in front of you when you are driving there

is an immediate flush of anxiety through your body. This helps direct our thinking and behaviour. That's your threat-protection system kicking in.

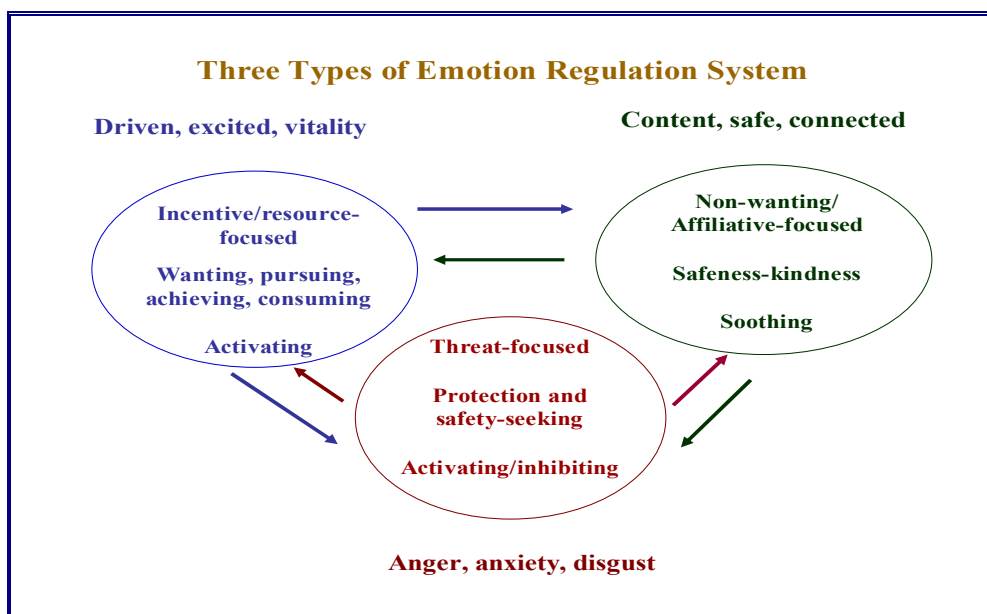


Diagram 2: Interactions between different types of emotional regulation system

Better safe than sorry

Now, an important point is that the basic threat system does not think much, it simply reacts because it operates on a 'better safe than sorry' principle. That principle saved our ancestors. Imagine our ancestors leave their cave and go searching for food. They hear sounds behind them and decide to run away. Now, 9 times out of 10 those sounds could have been made by birds or a rabbit, and running was unnecessary, but it could have been a lion or a snake. Those ancestors who opted for the *better safe than sorry* approach survived; they may have felt anxious and run away when they didn't need to, but they survived. The main thing is we're all very sensitive to threats and our brains can over-estimate threats and dangers because that's how they are designed to work.

That's right - our brains are designed to protect us rather than to always be cool and rational. They are designed to make mistakes! This means that unless we work at being cool and rational we can go on to the defensive very quickly (getting anxious or angry) because of how our brains have been designed. The bottom line is that our threat protection emotions are easy to activate and can be difficult to soothe and that's because they were designed for protection. So, at times, we need to see them as over-eager or over-developed protection systems rather than 'something bad or wrong' with us. This is not say that they can't cause our serious difficulties.

2. Incentive and Resource-seeking System (*The drive-excitement system*): The function of this system is to give us positive feelings that guide, motivate and encourage us to seek out things and resources that we (and those we love and care about) will need in order to survive and prosper. We are motivated and pleased by seeking out, consuming and achieving nice things (e.g. food, places to live, comforts, friendships, and so on). If we win a competition, pass an exam, or get to go out with a desired person, we can have feelings of excitement and pleasure. If you win the lottery and become a millionaire you might feel so energised that it may be difficult to sleep, your mind will be racing and you may want to

party all the time: the drive-excitement system gets out of balance, kind of *over-excited*. People who take certain drugs can over stimulate this system and suffer bad come-downs later. People with manic depression can have problems with this system too, because the activation can shift between too high to too low. When balanced with the other two systems it guides us towards important life goals. Imagine what life might be like without it: you'd have little motivation, energy or desire. Indeed, in depression people can lose some of the feelings that this system provides. If over stimulated, though, it can also drive us to wanting 'more and more' and to 'frustration and disappointment'. When our desires and goals are blocked for some reason this can be seen as a 'threat', the threat system kicks in with anxiety, frustration or anger.

This system is primarily an activating and 'go get' system. A substance in our brain called *dopamine* is important for our drives. As I have noted, lots of things can give a flush of dopamine: falling in love, passing an exam, winning something you want, even your football team winning a game. These are cues to what we call 'social success' and from an evolutionary point of view such cues indicate things are going well and are good for you, so enjoy and keep seeking them, as they are pleasurable and we will seek these things out. We will refer to this as the 'drive-excitement system' for short and to help us keep in mind its focus on activated positive feelings and motives.

As for our basic emotions this system guides our attention, thinking and feeling, and behaviour. You can explore this for yourself by simply remembering what your body feels like when you're excited, what you attend to and think about, and how you behave when you're excited, even mildly so.

3. Soothing and Contentment System: This system enables us to bring a certain soothing, quiescence and peacefulness to the self, which helps to restore our balance. When animals aren't defending themselves against threats and problems, and don't need to achieve or do anything (they have sufficient or enough), they can be content. Contentment is a form of being happy with the way things are and feeling safe, not striving or wanting; an inner peacefulness. When people practice meditation and 'slowing down' these are the feelings they report; not wanting or striving, but feeling calmer inside and connected to others. This is quite a different positive feeling from the hyped-up, excitement or 'striving and succeeding' feeling of the drive-excitement system. It is also different from just low levels of threat, which can be associated with boredom or a kind of emptiness.

Affection and kindness

What complicates this system, but is of great importance for our exploration of compassion, is that it is also linked to affection and kindness. For example, when a baby or child is distressed the love of the parent soothes and calms the infant. Affection and kindness from others also helps soothe us adults too when we're distressed. When we feel soothed we have feelings of safeness in our everyday lives. These feelings of soothing from kindness and support help us feel safe and they work through brain systems similar to those that produce peaceful feelings associated with fulfilment and contentment. Substances in our brain called *endorphins* are important for the peaceful, calm sense of well-being. These are also released when we feel kindness. There is also a hormone called *oxytocin* which links to our feelings of social safeness and affiliation. This hormone (along with the endorphins) gives us feelings of well-being that flow from feeling loved, wanted and safe with others.

You can explore for yourself what contentedness or kindness is like by simply remembering what your body feels like when you are content, or when others have been kind to you or when you feel kindness for yourself. When you feel safe and content, what do you attend to and think about? How do you behave when you're safe and content, even mildly? Okay, some of us might struggle here so we might need to use our imagination to guess how that might feel, but have a go.

This system is going to be a focus in our compassion training because it is helpful to our sense of well-being. I will refer to it as a *soothing and contentment system*.

Key point: For some people who have psychological difficulties, their threat and self-protection system is very highly developed, making anxiety and anger easy to feel, but their soothing and contentment system is less well developed because they've never had a chance to develop it. So, compassionate mind training is like physiotherapy for the mind. We will explore how to use certain exercises to try and help us develop that system.

Mood states

One last thing: Our moods are related to different patterns of brain chemicals, feelings and thoughts in our minds. Our moods can be affected by many things. For example, changes in hormones throughout a menstrual cycle; or being upset over the break up or loss of a relationship, or feeling exhausted and run down. In different moods different emotions can come to the fore – so sometimes we can just wake up feeling irritable or anxious. Moods are like patterns of our emotions. As we will see, trying to be understanding and compassionate about our moods can be helpful.

Emotions about Emotions

Things can be even trickier because we can have emotions about our emotions! We might become anxious of getting angry, or angry if we get anxious, or ashamed of losing our temper; or anger or ashamed of giving into temptation. It is common to have many different emotions *at the same time*. As we will note later, we see these emotions like 'different parts of ourselves that come with different thoughts and ideas'. For example, if we have an argument with someone then we might feel angry (because of what they have done), anxious in case the argument escalates out of hand, and sad because we would really like to have a nice relationship and we feel a loss of the bond. Three different feelings all at the same time. Such mixed and conflicting emotions can be confusing. Learning to be kind and understanding of ourselves, and that our brains can be hard to fathom, can be helpful and stop the self-attacking that can make things even more difficult to sort out.

Positive emotions can be difficult

Sometimes people have various fears of positive emotions – as if they are letting themselves off the hook or moving into unfamiliar territory. As one person noted “when you have felt angry and anxious most of your life positive feelings just don't seem real, they don't seem part of you”. So it can take quite a while to get used to what positive feelings might feel like, and we can even be frightened of them at times. For example, Sally would often look forward to things only to have her hopes dashed at the last moment

because her mother became unwell or angry. John remembers that often when things seemed to be going well, this would be a time his parents became angry or aggressive. For both Sally and John positive emotions were associated with 'bad things happening'. Hence, quite understandably they had learnt not to allow themselves to have positive emotions. The problem is that you can imagine what happens in our brain if we don't 'exercise' our positive emotion systems. So, rather than just assuming that positive feelings are not for us, we can recognise why we are frightened of them and allow ourselves to focus on small positive feelings – like enjoying a cup of tea or a meal, or somebody's company, or sharing a joke – and build up step by step.

When we work on compassion and feelings of warmth and kindness some people can be very anxious about these feelings for exactly the same reasons; feelings of warmth and kindness can feel like a weakness or making you very vulnerable. Once again whatever reasons you might have for fearing these feelings keep in mind they are part of your basic brain systems and we can learn to exercise them and get them working again.

Balancing our emotions

When we discuss 'balancing our emotions' we talk about being able to be appropriately anxious or angry when we need to be, but not when we don't, appropriately excited when we want to be, and appropriately gentle and kind when we want to be. Balance not only means that these systems gently balance each other – but it also means that we have some control and can make choices about our feelings. We don't have to avoid certain feelings because we are frightened of them – or because they remind us of unpleasant things. Becoming compassionate is not about weakness or letting one's guard down, it's about developing a rich mixture of feelings.

The Many Parts of You

If you have been following the above you will see that we are made up of *many different bits and pieces*. For example, there is an angry part that can think, feel and want to act a certain way; an anxious part that can think, feel and want to act a certain way; a 'falling in love' part that can think, feel and want to act a certain way; and a 'falling out of love' part that can think, feel and want to act a certain way.

Now you can imagine your brain, like a Christmas tree, lights up different patterns. When you're in an angry state your brain will be lighting up in *a particular pattern* but this would be quite different to (say) the *pattern of anxiety* or the *pattern of affection* or the *pattern of relaxation*. Although some patterns tend to get more regularly activated and can be more intense than others, it's helpful to think of all that goes in our minds as being linked to different parts of ourselves in different patterns, and not to over identify with any particular one. Why would you want to see *yourself* as a only one particular pattern e.g., as the angry pattern, or the anxious pattern, or the depressed pattern, or the food restricting pattern, or drug taking pattern. Sure these are patterns your mind can get locked into but you're much more than that. We will look at this again when we come to mindfulness.

This is important because we are going to be developing the compassionate part of you or the compassionate pattern within you. We can then use this part to look at other parts of you. For example, how might your compassionate self look at (and think about) your angry or anxious parts, or the part of you that is struggling to control your life and the way you'd like to be? In compassion-focused therapy we always try to develop, train, and then work with our compassionate self because that is the part that's likely to be most helpful. If we only listen to the angry part of ourselves, or the anxious part of ourselves, or the self-critical part of ourselves, then we tend to get quite a biased view. These parts can have quite strong voices which tend to be fairly dominant unless we learn to pay more attention to our compassionate self. This means practicing thinking about, imagining, and focusing on what it means to be a compassionate person in a non-judgmental way. For some people that's much easier said than done, as we will see.

Nonetheless we will see that sometimes, if our minds are in an anxious pattern or an angry pattern, we can try to deliberately focus on creating a compassionate pattern – rather than just letting the angry or anxious pattern run the show. So, your compassionate self is a part of you or a pattern within you that we want to try and develop through practice, which can then be useful for dealing with more difficult aspects of ourselves. Your compassionate self will think, feel and want to behave in specific ways that can counteract more angry or anxious patterns.

What is Compassion?

Developing compassion can be a way of bringing our emotions into a helpful balance that increases our sense of well-being. So we need to think about *what compassion is* because this is what's going to help us balance our systems and also stimulate that soothing system we mentioned above. Now, compassion can be defined in many ways. For example, the Dalai Lama, who is the head of Tibetan Buddhism, defines it as '**a sensitivity to the suffering of self and others with a deep wish and commitment to relieve the suffering**'. One way we can think about compassion (and there are various ways) is to see that it is made up of different aspects of our minds. I distinguish between attributes and skills.

The attributes and qualities of compassion

- * The first attribute and quality of compassion involves making a decision to try to be compassionate. In other words, we are **motivated** to (want to) have a go at becoming more compassionate, to see this as desirable. We can recognise that the compassionate self is a self worth 'feeding' and working to develop.
- * Second, we make an effort to train our minds to become **sensitive** to our feelings and thoughts. We also need to become sensitive to our needs. It's difficult to be self-compassionate if we are completely insensitive to our pain, upset, wants or needs. So we learn to notice our thoughts and feelings as they arise. However, sensitivity does not mean we just react to things. For example, if criticism upsets us we might say we're 'sensitive to criticism' but really we mean we are 'vulnerable to reacting in a certain way'. To be sensitive means 'openness and ability to notice and attend in certain ways'.
- * Third, compassion requires us to be emotionally open to ours and others' suffering. This means that we are emotionally touched, moved and **sympathetic** to suffering. Sympathy is an emotional reaction to our and other people's emotions and states – it is that immediate wince if we see someone fall over heavily or cut themselves. Sympathy can also operate when we are moved and take joy from the flourishing and well-being of others.
- * Fourth, we can only be truly open to feelings if we can **tolerate** them. We have a variety of feelings, sometimes sad, angry or anxious and sometimes joyful. However, sometimes we are critical of our feelings, or try to run away from them, hide from or suppress them, but when we are compassionate we can learn to be open, tolerant, accepting of and kind to our feelings. So a key aspect of compassion is learning how to tolerate and come to terms with, become familiar with, and less frightened of, our feelings. This doesn't mean, of course, that we don't wish to change our feelings for things, for other people or even ourselves. Indeed, we may well do, but we are unlikely to do that through criticism, running away or suppressing our feelings; rather, we have to face them openly and kindly. We can also find that when we are able to face our feelings we can be more reflective - and this helps us develop and show empathy.
- * The fifth aspect is called **empathy** and this is about how we come to *understand and think* about our feelings and our thoughts. We become openhearted, curious, explorative and wanting to know why we feel what we feel or why we think what we think, so that things can make sense to us. When we have empathy for others we make an effort to think about things from their point of view, to try to understand that they may think and feel differently from us. In showing empathy we have to do some work. For example, if somebody hurts you but you realise that they were under enormous stress then you don't

take it personally and you forgive them: you are showing empathy.

* Sixth is the important attribute of **non-condemning** and **non-judging**. The distressed mind, for example, can be filled with condemning and critical thoughts of our self or others. Giving this up is linked to becoming kind and mindful; we become more aware of thoughts and feelings but from an observational point of view. We don't judge them, nor try to suppress them or push them out of our minds, avoid or run away from them. Rather, we learn to notice but not act on our feelings.

Remember these abilities can be developed in small stages, step by step. All of these are engaged with the feelings of warmth and a genuine desire to relieve suffering and increase our growth and flourishing.

The skills of compassion

What about the *skills of* compassion? Well, they involve learning to direct our **attention** in a compassionate and helpful way; learning to **think and reason** in a compassionate and helpful way; and learning to **behave** in a rational and compassionate way. We do each of these with the **feelings of warmth, support and kindness**.

Consider attention: Attention is what we direct our focus towards, what we look at, what we listen to, what we remember and how we do those things. So, for example, with a glass of water that is half empty, we can ask and attend to the half empty part or the half full part. When something negative happens or you are unhappy with yourself, can you redirect your attention to something that is helpful? Compassionate *attention* is very important.

The next skill is compassionate *reasoning or thinking*. Can we train our minds to focus on reasoning and thinking about ourselves, our relationships and situations in a way that is compassionate and helpful? When we ruminate on our anxiety, disappointments, or anger, this will lock in these feelings. So can we practice deliberately choosing to refocus our reasoning helpfully, to really ask ourselves the question "What is a helpful way for me to think about this problem, situation, or difficulty?" Do not become confused with the idea that compassionate thinking is simply 'being nice'. Thinking things through compassionately is being honest, and at times thinking about difficult thoughts, or painful, difficult, or even aggressive, feelings and dilemmas.

Our third skill is learning how to *behave* compassionately, that is in ways which we identify will be helpful to us and help us with our suffering, moving us forward in our life's journey. Sometimes compassionate behaviour can mean being nice to yourself, recognising if you need a rest, or you need the support of others and to ask for help, or just treating yourself kindly with something relaxing or fun. When we behave compassionately to others we try to do things that will help them overcome suffering and/or to flourish. Of course, compassionate behaviour also links to openness and generosity, a preparedness to be giving to our self and others that which is conducive to our and their well-being.

Compassionate behaviour can also help us develop *courage* to do things that may be blocking us. Sometimes compassionate behaviour is about acting against anxiety or depression or basic prejudice and doing things even though we don't want to. It's compassionate because, although taking what might seem like an easier short term path (e.g. avoiding doing anything) might give us temporary relief, it

doesn't take us anywhere. When we are compassionate to others it is sometimes being assertive and clear and helping them face something that is important for their development, but of course we do this kindly and without malice. So compassionate behaviour can be tough! Life is often not easy.

Warmth and kindness

Now, as we have repeatedly noted it is our intentions that are important – even if we do not have certain feelings. Sometimes warmth is hard to muster. So we can try to be kind and compassionate even if we do not feel it – feelings can come later with practice. We may try to be kind to our family even if we are in a bad mood and don't feel like it! Nonetheless an important element of all of the above, both attributes and skills, is to try to cultivate and generate *feelings of warmth and kindness*. This is where some people can begin to struggle. They may say they can feel kindness for others but cannot feel it for themselves. Don't worry too much about that as it is not uncommon. We know that when we are feeling distressed those feeling systems may not be working quite so well, so it's only natural if we struggle with the warmth feelings. We might have to wait for that system to get going a bit. The best steps here are to practice compassionate attention, thinking and behaviour aspects, and allow the feeling aspects to come with time.

The key issue for everything really is learning to focus on what is helpful for you and others; not in a selfish way, because you will find that is not helpful and other people will lose interest in you. Genuine compassionate helpfulness is about other people as well as us, however, is never submissive or simply gives in to what other people want and then leaves us feeling resentful or very needy for their approval. Learning to be assertive or to say 'no' can actually be very compassionate.

Compassionate attributes and compassionate skills are used to help balance and cope with and at times counteract feelings, styles of thinking and behaviour that arise when we are angry, anxious, depressed or distressed (see Table 2).

Don't worry if this seems a bit of a handful and too many things to think about. There is logic behind it and as we go through the exercises you will see how these attributes and skills can be used to help ourselves. So don't try and learn it all or remember it all. If you only have a very vague idea about the sorts of compassionate skills we are going to develop that's fine.

So, here are the ideas, but now they are put together in a circle for you. We show them like this to help us see that each skill in the outer circle can be used to help develop an attribute on the inner circle. Also, if we focus on trying to develop an attribute, for example, to become more sensitive or more tolerant to our emotions or those of others, then we can do this with training our attention, thinking and behaviour.

Compassionate Attributes	Compassionate Skills
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Developing a motivation to be caring towards our self and others – reduce suffering and help to flourish. 2. Developing sensitivity to our feelings and needs of our self and others (different from vulnerability). 3. Developing sympathy, being moved and emotionally in tune with our feelings, distresses and needs for growth. 4. Developing abilities to tolerate, rather than avoid, difficult feelings, memories or situations (including positive emotions). 5. Developing our insight and understanding of how our mind works, why we feel what we feel; why our thoughts are as they are. 6. Developing an accepting, non-condemning, and non-submissive orientation to ourselves and others. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning to deliberately focus our attention on things that are helpful and bring a balanced perspective. Developing mindful attention and using our attention to bring to mind helpful compassionate images and/or a sense of self. 2. Learning to think and reason, using our rational mind, looking at the evidence and bringing a balanced perspective. Writing down and reflecting on our styles of thinking and reasoning. 3. Learning to plan and engage in behaviours that act to relieve distress. Reduce safety behaviours and move us (and others) forward to our (or their) life goals – to flourish. Compassionate behaviour often needs courage.

Table 2: Compassionate attributes and compassionate skills

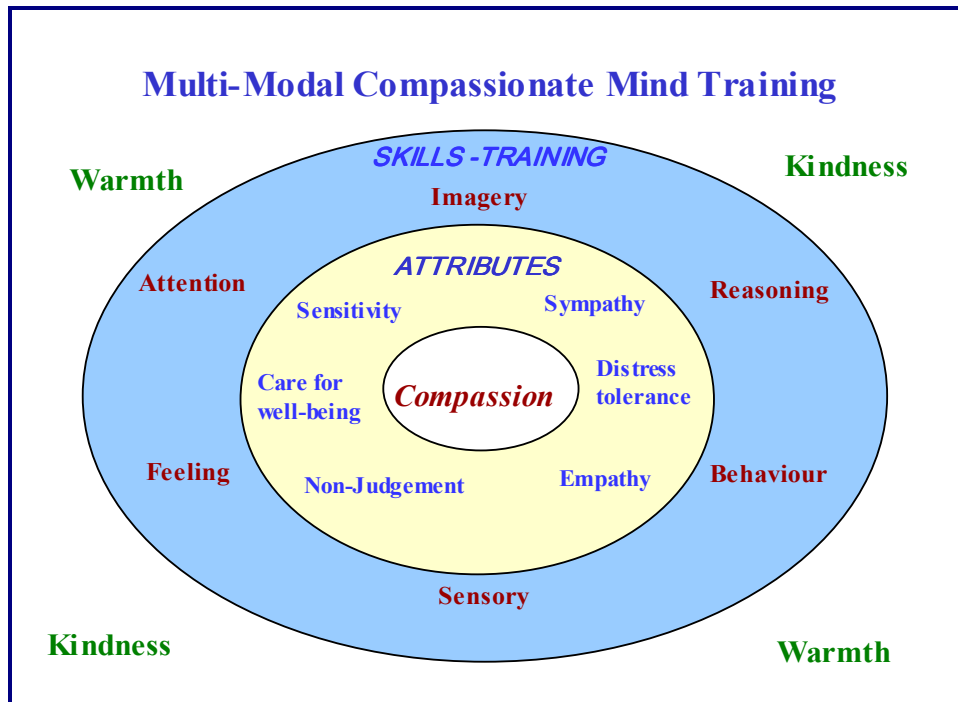


Diagram 3: A model for Compassionate Mind Training

How Will Teaching Myself to be Compassionate Help Me?

Researchers all over the world are now looking into the important physical and mental health benefits of developing compassion and mindfulness.

- For over 2,500 years Buddhists have argued strongly that life has much pain and suffering in it and that developing compassion is a way to help us through difficulties.
- Studies of evolution have also shown that many animals, especially humans, are evolved to need and respond to the care of others. We are biologically made to be very receptive to care and kindness.
- Studies show that there are areas of our brain that light up when we are kind to ourselves or others, or when others are kind to us.

Increasingly, research is showing that if we focus on developing compassion and kindness for ourselves and others this really does help settle our feelings.

Fear of Compassion

Research is also showing that some people find kindness and compassion difficult. They believe they don't deserve it, that it's weak and woolly, that it wouldn't help them, or are even frightened by it. It can feel so strange because they are not used to it. Sometimes, when we start to develop kindness, this puts

us in touch with sadness, and that too can seem overwhelming or frightening. As we will see though, these fears and difficulties are not uncommon and we can work through these difficulties step-by-step.

How our Thoughts and Images Affect our Minds and Brains

To help you explore how our thoughts, images and memories can have powerful effects on systems in our brains look at Diagram 4 below. This depicts a brain - okay it was drawn by me so it is not a great picture, but will hopefully do the job. It will show us how external things and *our imagination* of external things can work in a very similar way. Let's start with some examples that I commonly use.

Our thoughts and images can have very powerful effects on our brains and bodily systems. Imagine that you are very hungry and you see a lovely meal. What happens in your body? The sight of the meal will stimulate an area of your brain that will send messages to your body so that your mouth will start to water, your stomach acids get going and you get the tummy rumbles. Spend a moment really thinking about that. Okay, but now suppose that you're very hungry but maybe it is late at night and you can't get any food, so you just close your eyes and you just *imagine* a wonderful meal. What happens in your body then? Again, spend a moment really thinking about that. Well, those images *that you deliberately create in your mind* can also send messages to parts of your brain that send messages to your body so that your mouth will water and again your stomach acids will get going. Remember, though, this time there is no actual meal, it's only an image that you've created in your mind, yet that image is capable of stimulating those physiological systems in your body that make your saliva flow. Spend a moment and think about that.

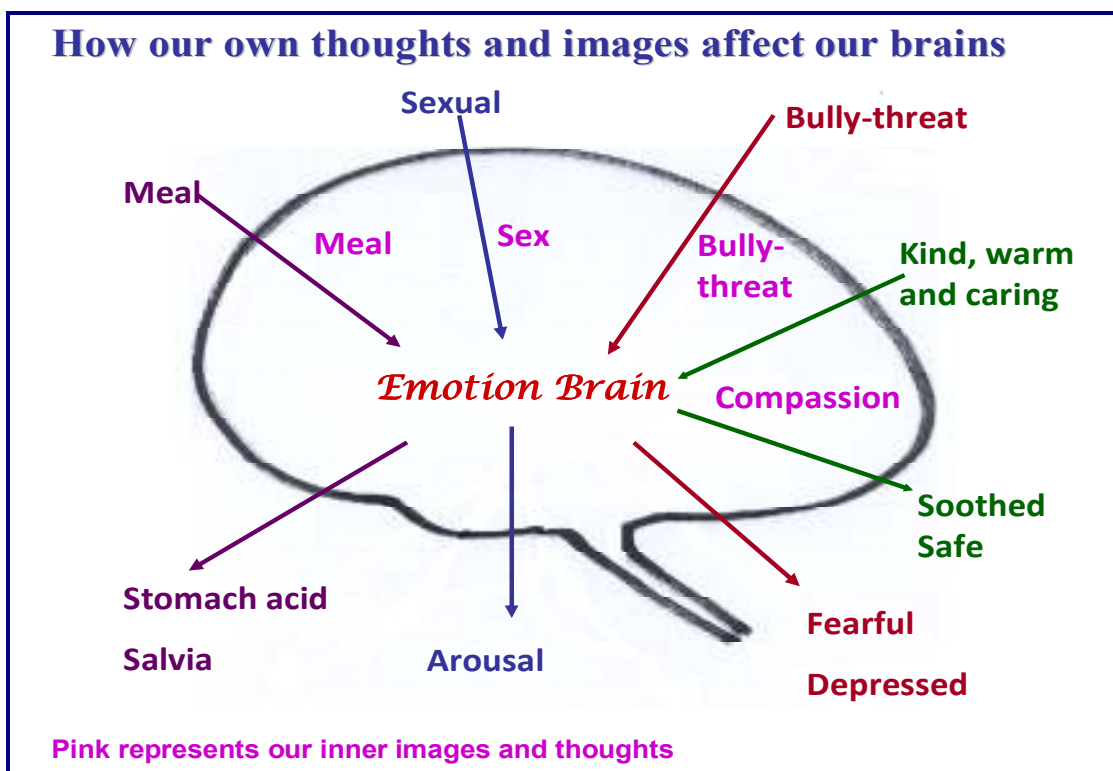


Diagram 4: Interactions between our thoughts, images and our emotions

Okay, let's look at another example, something that all of us have come across: You see something sexy on TV. Now, this may stimulate an area of your brain that affects your body, leading to arousal, but equally, of course, we know that even if you're in the house alone you can just imagine something sexy and that can affect your body. The reason for this is that the image alone can stimulate physiological systems in your brain in an area called the *pituitary*, which will release hormones into your body.

The point of this story is, then, that thoughts and images are very powerful ways of stimulating things in our brains and our body. Spend a moment and really think about that because this insight will link to other ideas to come. The images that you deliberately create in your mind, and your thinking, will stimulate your physiology and body systems. (Incidentally, be sure you don't get meals and sex mixed up as did Hannibal Lecter!).

The power of self-criticism

Let's turn this around and think of a more 'threat-focused' example. If someone is bullying you (always pointing out and dwelling on your mistakes or things you are unhappy with, or telling you that you are no good and there is no point in you trying anything), or if they're angry with you, this will affect your stress systems and your stress hormone, cortisol, will increase. How do you feel if people criticise you? How does it feel in your body? Spend a moment thinking about this. Their unpleasantness will make you feel anxious, upset and unhappy because those threat emotion systems in your brain have been triggered. If the criticism is harsh and constant it may make you feel distressed, unhappy or depressed. You wouldn't be surprised by that would you? However, as we have suggested, and here is the point, *our own thoughts and images can do the same*. If you are constantly putting yourself down this can also activate your stress systems and trigger the emotional systems in your brain that lead you to feeling anxious, angry and down. That's right, our own thoughts can affect parts of our brain that give rise to more *stressful and unpleasant feelings*. It can certainly tone down positive feelings. Whoever had a feeling of joy, happiness, contentment or well-being, from being criticised?! If we develop a self-critical style then we are constantly stimulating our threat system and will understandably feel constantly threatened. Self-criticism then stimulates the threat system. This is no different from saying that sexual thoughts and feelings will stimulate your sexual system, or that the thought of a lovely meal will stimulate your eating system.

Now, there are many reasons for becoming self-critical. One common reason is that others have been critical of us in the past and we simply take their views as accurate. We don't stop to think whether they were genuinely interested in our welfare and really cared and wanted to help us – in fact they may just have been rather stressed and irritable people who were critical of everyone. We just go along with their criticisms of us, as one often does as a child, and never stop to think if they are accurate or reasonable. It may also be that we are trying very hard to reach a certain standard or achieve something or present ourselves in a certain way. When it does not work out as we would like this can frighten us because we might think we have let ourselves down or *others will be rejecting of us*. In our frustration we then criticise ourselves and take that frustration out on ourselves. All of this is very understandable, but not helpful, because we are giving ourselves threat signals that *affect our brains*. In fact, my colleagues and I, with researchers at the University of Aston, have just explored what happens in people's brains when they are self-critical. It really is the case that we stimulate threat systems in our brain. The more self-

critical we are, the more those systems are stimulated. Learning to spot self-criticism and learning what to do about it will be a key issue.

The power of self-kindness

We have spent some time looking at the three emotion regulation systems and we explored a system in the brain that helps to soothe and calm us when things are hard or when we are frightened – we called this a soothing and contentment system. In the normal course of events, we feel soothed when others are kind and understanding, supportive and encouraging. We have a system in our brains that can respond to those behaviours from others. Suppose that when things are hard for you and you are struggling, there is someone who cares about you, understands how hard it is, and encourages you with warmth and genuine care – how does that feel? Maybe you could spend some time thinking about this right now.

Using exactly the same idea of how imagining a meal can stimulate sensations and feelings in our bodies that are linked to eating, we can think about how our own thoughts and images might be able to stimulate the soothing and contentment system. If we can learn to be kind and supportive, to send ourselves helpful messages when things are hard for us, we are more likely to stimulate those parts of our brain that respond to kindness. This will help us cope with stress and set backs. This is one reason why it is helpful to learn how to engage with compassionate attention, compassionate thinking, compassionate behaviour, compassionate imagery and compassionate feeling. Bear in mind all the time that this is about helping you rebalance systems in your brain.

As we mentioned above, for people who are very self-critical, beginning to become self-compassionate can seem like a threat to them. Some people feel that self-kindness, wanting kindness or even making every effort to be kind and gentle to one self is a weakness or an indulgence. These people believe that either they or others simply don't deserve it. Our research indicates that when some people first start to be kind to their selves they can feel it as rather strange or threatening. They have to work through these 'fears' to start training their minds in self-kindness.

The key thing here is your *intention and desire to become more compassionate*. Your feelings may take a while follow. For example, you might want to learn to play the piano or guitar, but it might take some practice before you start to feel the music you're playing. We might have to behave compassionately before we start feeling much, so don't worry if your feelings rather drag behind your intentions. Your intention and efforts to become compassionate are what counts.

There is now a lot of evidence that self-compassion and self-kindness are associated with well-being and being able to cope with life's stresses. Dr Kristen Neff has been a leading researcher in this field and you can read more about her work and findings at www.self-compassion.org. Dr Neff's work, and my own, has shown that there are important differences between self-compassion and self-esteem. For example, self-compassion is important when things are difficult, going wrong and you are having a hard time. Self-esteem, on the other hand, tends to be associated with doing well and achieving. Self-esteem is more linked to our drive-achievement system. Self-esteem often focuses on how well we are doing in comparison to others and this is why low self-esteem is often linked to feeling inferior, and judging

ourselves in comparison to others. Self-compassion on the other hand is about focusing on our similarities and shared humanity with others, who also struggle as we do.

I hope you can see that by understanding that our brains have been designed by evolution to need and to respond positively to kindness, it is not a question of *deserve*. It is not a self-indulgence any more than training your body to be fit and healthy is self-indulgent. It is simply a question of treating our brain wisely and feeding it appropriately. This is no different really to, say, understanding that our body needs certain vitamins and a balanced diet. So then, it's not a question of whether you deserve to give your body vitamins or not, one simply does it because it's sensible. This is the same with kindness. It is not an issue of whether we deserve it; it's an issue of understanding how our mind works and then practicing how to feed it things to help it work optimally. We will be looking at this because some people find this a bit tricky; they can even be frightened to give up their sense of being inadequate or bad in some way. However, if you feel like this but keep an open mind you can practice switching to self-kindness each day and see how things go.

Key Messages

- Our brains evolved over millions of years and have a range of complex desires, emotions and needs.
- All of us *just find ourselves here*, existing with our brains that have been designed and built for us, trying as best we can to deal with complex emotions and desires.
- The kind of genes we inherit and the backgrounds we come from shape our brains, our beliefs and values.
- We did not choose these but just have to do the best we can as we discover them within ourselves. Much of what goes on in our mind and brains is not our fault.
- Many of the unpleasant emotions, especially the big two of anger and anxiety, are actually designed for dealing with threats and self-protection.
- Self-protection emotions are easy to develop and learn and can link to bodily and emotional memories and understandable safety strategies such as avoidance, aggressiveness, closing down or submission.
- Our basic self-protection and safety strategies, however, can stop us from learning, growing, developing and balancing our emotions. As we will see, becoming more aware of what 'arises' in our minds and leaning how to refocus on other emotions can help us notice, and not act out, these feelings – especially if we see that it will have harmful consequences to us and is not really conducive for our well being.

- We have two types of positive emotion - one is linked to achieving, doing and acquiring things; the other is linked to contentment, feeling safe, and kindness from people and ourselves. Being kind and supportive can help develop this system.
- Compassionate Mind Training helps us to understand how our threat and self-protection system is working and how to develop a kinder and more soothing approach to our minds.
- In Compassionate Mind Training we shift from blaming and criticising ourselves, or self-dislike, to being curious about how our minds work; understanding and *taking responsibility* to try as best we can to feel more in control and at peace with ourselves.
- Compassionate Mind Training involves a range of skills and attributes. We can train ourselves to attend to things that are helpful to us and others, to focus our thinking on things that are helpful to us and to others and to behave in ways that are helpful to us and to others. This develops a compassionate orientation, motivation and abilities to be open to and tolerant of distress. From here we can work on whatever problems we need to work on – from an understanding, kind and compassionate position.

Section Two

Compassion: The Exercises



Preparing for Compassionate Exercises

We have looked at our basic model and some ideas about compassion and the different elements of compassion. That might seem quite a lot to take in but don't worry, just take it a step at a time and practice. When you first come to learn to drive a car there are the gears to think about, and the pedals, and the steering wheel, and the indicators, and the handbrake, and the wing mirrors - gosh that is a lot isn't it! However, with practice you gently get the hang of it and it becomes smooth. So don't be put off at all if at first you think there's a bit too much here. Just go at your own pace, picking it up bit by bit and that's fine.

Starting your practise

If you think of anything that you would like to learn, such as swimming, playing the piano, playing golf or driving a car, it's always best to start off when things are easy. It's not a good idea to learn how to swim if you've fallen overboard in a storm rather in the shallow end of a warm swimming pool. It's best to learn to drive on the back streets and when the roads are empty of cars. All skills that we learn need to start from a place, and be practiced, where we find it relatively straightforward. The second aspect of practise is like getting physically fit. The more we do something the more we enable our *bodies* and *brains* to actually change. So again, practise can help to literally *change your mind* overtime. Sometimes people will try some of the exercises outlined below, but then feel disappointed when they do not work for them when they want them to, e.g. when they have got into an emotional state. Now, these exercises are not magic (of course), and there will be times, even for the most practiced of us, when our emotions get the better of us, still practice can help you. But have a go yourself and see how you go.

Attention

Shortly we'll be looking at some compassion exercises and bring compassion into our minds. To start with though it is useful to think about why we practise and the manner of our practise. Part of the reason is related to how our attention works - in terms of bringing things into consciousness – our abilities to use attention is like having *a zoom lens in our mind*.

Why should this be an issue for us? Well, because of what we looked at in Diagram 4, the way our thoughts and images can stimulate our emotions. You might want to go back to remind yourself of that. Keep in mind that where your attention goes to, and what your mind dwells on, will affect your emotions and body states. So let's do an experiment with our attention and explore this together.

Sit comfortably and when you are and focus on your right foot. Explore the feelings in your toes and then your heel and then your whole foot. Hold your attention there for about 30 seconds. Now switch your attention to your left foot. Again explore your feelings in your toes and then your heel and then your whole foot. Hold your attention there for 30 seconds or so. Now focus on your right hand. Notice the feelings and sensations in your fingers and your thumb. Again hold that attention for about 30 seconds. Next focus on your left foot. Hold your attention there for 30 seconds. Finally, focus your attention on your lips and the sensations around your mouth.

Now you have read the instructions, have a go at this.

Assuming that you have tried this – what you might have noticed is that when you *focus* on your left foot or your hand or your lips, *these expand in your field of awareness*. That is interesting and important to realise – but in addition, as they do so, the things you have previously been focusing on fade into the background. As you become more aware of your hand or your lips, your awareness of your feet fades into the background. You can see then that your attention is like a spotlight and it helps you to bring things into foreground of consciousness or you can imagine it like a zoom lens.

This raises the issue about what you want to attend to, what you want to zoom in on, what you want to bring into the forefront of your consciousness. It also raises the issue of whether you've learnt to control or choose how you direct that zoom lens – your attention – or whether it tends to zoom in on things simply because they have emotional urgency or power.

Let's look at this in terms of emotions and feelings. As you're sitting there bring to mind something that you enjoy doing, or maybe something you are looking forward to, or a happy memory. Break off from reading this manual and really bring this to mind. Notice what happens in your body when you bring something pleasant to mind. Maybe you'll remember something that made you laugh and you noticed that your face begins to smile a little. What you are bringing into mind, what your attention is pulling into the foreground and zooming in on, is affecting you in a variety of ways.

Okay now having noticed how you can bring into mind and focus on a happy, thought, image or memory, and how that helped you feel certain things. Let's refocus our attention and bring to mind something that

you don't want to do, maybe you are a bit anxious about it, or think of something that has made you a little unhappy. Let your attention bring those thoughts or images into the foreground. Notice what happens to your feelings and in your body when your attention zooms in on these things and brings into the foreground of your mind.

You can probably see that when you bring this memory or thought into your attentional field, those good feelings you have just moments before fades away. This is not so different to noticing how your awareness of the feelings in your foot fade when you focus your attention on your hand or your lips.

The point about this exercise then is to help you to recognise that our attention can be directed by us once we realise that we can learn *to notice* our attention – where it is and what it is focusing on. We can then become aware that it can be captured by unpleasant emotions or ruminations that are not helpful to us. When we notice this, we can learn to redirect it if we wish. The trick really is to notice that very often attention is *captured* by our emotions – or is *drawn into* rumination. We don't stop and think 'do I actually want to attend to this', 'do I actually want to think or focus on this feeling or memory or stream of thinking'?

Here we have learnt an important lesson - that we can learn how to train our minds so that our attention brings into the foreground ideas, images, or ways of thinking that are going to be helpful to us rather than let our attention drift around in a sea of anxiety or unhappy things. We simply need to pay attention. Well we say simply but actually training our minds like this does take practise!

Now this is not to teach you simply to avoid thinking about unhappy things, and always distract yourself by happy things, because it's also important to learn how to tolerate, accept and work with difficult emotions too. Difficult emotions are part of our being and often they can have important messages for us if we listen to them and pay attention to them carefully. We can do this by becoming curious, observant, watchful and interested in our emotions. However, it's also useful to recognise when we are *caught up in* emotions and ruminations that are not helpful, and we can learn to refocus our attention. Although the pull of emotions can be very powerful – simply being aware that we don't have focus on things in a ruminative, unhelpful way is important.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness, attention and distraction

Learning to become attentive to our attention is also linked to 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness is about clarity of observation and attention. Mindfulness often means holding our attention in a particular moment on a particular thing or action, and slowing down tendencies for thinking, judging and doing lots of different things at the same time. Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the world leaders in advocating mindfulness, suggests that mindfulness is a way of "paying attention to the present moment without judgment". So, for example, when walking down the street we are mindful when our mind is focused on our walking, where we are, enjoying the colours and feel of the day, and just being in that moment. In contrast, we could be walking and our head is full of other things, what we should have for dinner, how we could sort out financial

problems, an argument we might have had. So we are living in our thoughts (or inner creations), not in the moment that is surrounding us.

For instance, suppose you're going to eat an apple. How would you do this mindfully? First, look at the apple and note all of its colours and textures and hold it in your hand and feel the quality of its skin. Don't rush, spend time just observing it. When your mind wanders from your focus on the apple (as it most likely will) gently bring your focus back to it. In this exploration, you're not judging the apple; you're simply exploring its properties. Then, take a knife and peel it or cut into it. Once again, notice the effect that you have on the apple, the colour and texture of the fruit beneath the skin. Take time to really observe it. Next, take a bite of the apple. Now focus on your sense of taste and what the apple feels like in your mouth. Next, chew slowly, feeling the texture in your mouth, noticing how the juice is stimulating your salivary glands and how the saliva feels in your mouth. Really focus on the taste. As you chew, notice how the apple becomes mushier. As you swallow, pay attention to the sensations of swallowing.

So, you have explored the apple visually, by touch and feel, by smell and texture and by taste. If you had dropped the apple, you would have been able to hear what it sounded like – but you don't need to do that today! In this interaction, there's *no judgement*; there's only *your experience of your interaction* with the apple in each moment. This is *mindful attention* – being in the activity rather than distracted from it by other thoughts, and exploring all aspects of the activity to the full. If you performed this activity, biting into an apple, *without* mindfulness, your mind would probably have wandered: while you were eating you might have been thinking about problems at work for what you can watch and television. Your mind is not fully on the activity before you don't notice the sensations and fall of eating the apple. You might also find your mind focused on the apple but in a very judgmental way “This isn't a good apple – where did I buy it? I ought to eat more fruit. Actually I don't like apples ... Oh, damn, I just cut my finger!”

In mindfulness we learn to notice the distraction (the ‘wandering off’ thoughts) and gently and kindly bring our minds back on task and focus. In fact, it is this issue of how the wandering mind hops about all over the place and can be so easily captured by desires and emotions that is the focus of Mindfulness training.

Mindfulness is important because most of our lives are spent doing one thing and thinking about something else, and we're never fully in the moment. Our minds are constantly distracted. Take driving, for example, we can get home and realise that we can't actually remember how we got there, because our minds were full of 101 other things. If something unexpected happened, maybe a group of naked motorbike riders flashed past us, our attention would have been awakened, or if the driver in front of us suddenly put on their brake lights, our attention would have been focused again. This is not an example of savouring the moment though; it's about being brought to alertness for a specific reason. Mindfulness is about being in the moment, about experiencing exactly what is happening *right now*.

Mindfulness is paying attention in a specific way and acknowledging the distractions. When our mind wanders we learn to notice the distractions and *gently and kindly* re-focus the attention. Clearly this is going to be very helpful when we start practicing some of our compassionate images and other aspects of work. This is because we will find our minds wander but we don't need to bother about that because we have a way of just bringing our attention back to the task. Now, mindfulness actually has benefits in

its own right and there are many therapies which teach people mindfulness. At the end of this workbook you can find recommendations for various books and CDs where you can find out more.

Mindfulness and practise

As with all of the exercises we will be discussing, it is how we practise that's important. Sometimes people get discouraged when they begin practicing mindfulness exercises such as focusing on the breath, because their attention wanders so often. Many often think, "Oh, I just can't do this!" and may give up. This is based on a misunderstanding of what mindfulness is. One of the primary benefits of mindfulness is that we gain a greater awareness of the way our minds work, and that *requires* that our minds wander off, so that we can learn to notice it when it does. So instead of being discouraged when we notice that our mind has wandered or that we're off in thought, we can be pleased that we noticed this. *This noticing is a major point of mindfulness practice*, and when we do this, it's a sign that we're getting to know our minds better.

Commonly, people may think that mindfulness means sitting still, totally at peace, with completely focused attention. That again is a misunderstanding. In fact, mindfulness is simply observing and being with *whatever* is happening in this moment. We used an example of eating an apple above to illuminate mindfulness as being in the action as it unfolds. All our actions can be done mindfully.

Nonetheless, putting time aside to focus on specific tasks such as mindfully focusing on our breathing (see the soothing rhythm breathing exercise below) is extremely helpful to train our minds. When we first begin to practise mindfulness, putting it in action in everyday life, or putting time aside for specific tasks, the first thing we commonly notice is that our minds can't focus on what is happening in this moment. Rather, our thoughts and emotions are all over the place, but this noticing *is* actually the point – so if you notice that, if you become aware of how much your mind bounces about, you are practicing mindfulness! The nice thing is that with practice, noticing when our attention wanders and bringing it back to the object of mindfulness (the breath, the apple, or whatever) over and over, our minds will begin to calm down over time, and we'll be able to maintain our focus for longer and longer.

If you have thoughts of "I'm not doing this right" or "I should be able to focus better than this" or "My mind seems impossible to focus" just notice these thoughts and kindly and gently bring your mind back to the focus of your attention. It really does not matter if your mind wanders 100 or 1000 times because all you're trying to do is notice this and return your attention.

One last aspect on mindfulness, and indeed all the practices which we will be discussing, is that it's best to practise when things are easy and you are relaxed. It is difficult to try mindfulness for the first time when you are feeling stressed, it is like learning to swim in a choppy sea.

Mindfulness and consciousness

Before we leave the subject of how our attention works and the importance of mindfulness in our lives we must address another key issue, which is on the nature of consciousness itself, and of course our *sense of being* alive, being aware that we exist as 'a self'. A very important idea in mindfulness is the very nature of our consciousness. Consider that we are a point of consciousness moving through time. Your consciousness does not exist in the moment just gone or in the moment to come, only now. Think

about that for a moment. You exist right now and only now! Of course, *in* your imagination you can bring into your mind things from the past or you can imagine things in the future, but you don't actually exist there! We only exist right now in *this* moment. Mindfulness is a way of helping us to understand this and to live much more where we *actually exist!* It is to help our minds to be more fully *where we are*.

Consciousness is interesting to think about for a number of other reasons too. It is like a spotlight. The power of the spotlight can light up many different things: a book on the table, a plant, a picture on the wall, an area of dirty carpet, but the spotlight is not the thing it lights up. A mirror can reflect many things but the mirror is not the thing it reflects. Consciousness is like the mirror. Alternatively, consider water: It can contain poison or medicine but basically it is just water, not what it contains.

We can think of our minds like this and try to reside in the 'spotlight', in the nature of consciousness - notice what the spotlight lights up (e.g., our emotions or a stream of thoughts or fantasies about the future or memories about the past) but we can also learn to distinguish this consciousness of, the nature of our minds from what it actually contains. If we use the water example again, just as water can be clouded and coloured by many different things – so our consciousness can also be filled with different feelings of anger or anxiety or with unpleasant memories. One of the aspects of mindfulness is learning to be attentive to the fact of *being conscious beings* rather than the content of our minds. Learning to pay attention to our consciousness in this moment is an element of mindfulness. Don't worry if this seems a little tricky because we will practice as we go.

Soothing Rhythm Breathing

We're now going to use the same idea of mindfully peeling and eating an apple, but this time whilst concentrate on our breathing. This will become a focus around which we will do some compassion-focused exercises later. The most important thing here is simply to practise the breathing without worrying if you're doing it correctly. These thoughts are common and understandable, but are distractions. If they arise in your mind, simply notice them, call them your 'judging and evaluative thoughts', *smile compassionately* to yourself and bring your attention back to the task.

Now, some people find focusing on the breath not easy to begin with, it may actually make them feel more anxious. Only do things that are helpful for you, but you might find that if you spend just a few seconds having a go and seeing how you get on this could be helpful. You can also try some of the relaxation exercises without focusing on the breath and see if that helps you.

There are many aspects to resting the mind and body, I'm going to take you through a few simple relaxing exercises. The first one is called 'soothing rhythm breathing' and involves learning how to pay attention in a gentle and kind way. Once you are familiar with this you can do the exercise sitting down, lying down or even standing up and walking. It is, however, preferable to do it sitting down to begin with, so you get the idea of it. So find somewhere to sit comfortably.

Exercise 1: Soothing Rhythm Breathing

Okay, now that you are sitting comfortably, place both feet flat on the floor about shoulder's width apart and rest your hands on your legs. Close your eyes, or look down at the floor if you prefer. Allow yourself to have a gentle facial expression may be a slight smile.

Now what we can do is just gently focus on our breathing. As you breathe try to allow the air to come down into your diaphragm (that's just at the bottom of your ribcage in the upside down 'V'). Feel your diaphragm, the area underneath your ribs, move as you breathe in and out. Just notice your breathing and play an experiment with your breathing. Breathe a little faster or a little slower until you find a breathing pattern that, for you, seems to be your own soothing, comforting rhythm. It is like you are checking in, linking up, with the rhythm within your body that is soothing and calming to you.

What you will usually find is that your breathing is slightly slower and deeper than normal. The in-breath is about 3 seconds ... hold ... and then take 3 seconds for the out-breath. Ensure that the breaths in and out are smooth and even. So, for example, notice if you're breathing in a bit too quickly or collapsing the out breath.

Now we can spend a little while – for as long as we wish - just focusing on our breathing, just noticing the breath coming down into the diaphragm, your diaphragm lifting and then the air moving out, through your nose. Sometimes it's useful to focus on the point just inside the nose where the air enters. So, in through your mouth and out from your nose, in through your mouth and out through your nose..... Just focus on that for a while.....

Now we can just 'ground ourselves for a moment'. So turn your attention to your body. Sensing the weight of your body resting on the chair and the floor underneath you.... Allowing yourself to feel held and supported.....coming to rest...in the present moment....

Remember that it is perfectly ok for your mind to wander. Simply notice it happening with curiosity about where your mind has gone and then gently guide your attention back to an awareness of your body as best as you can. Now just sense the flow of air coming in and out of your nostrils....just gently observing....no need to change anything.....just allowing things to be as they are.

If you find focusing on your breathing a bit difficult (and some people do) then allow your attention to rest on an object. Find something you might like to hold such as a smooth stone or a soft ball – something that gives you the feeling of gentleness and calmness. Now as you just focus on your breathing also focus on your object that you're holding noticing how it feels in your hand resting your gaze on your object as best as you can.... staying with the sensations of holding it in your hand.

When you feel ready, slowly open your eyes and bring yourself back to the present moment. Sometimes it helps if you just have a gentle stretch and a deep breath to prepare you to carry on with your day.

What did you notice? You may have noticed that actually, although it may only have been a short time say 30 seconds, your mind might have wandered off. You may have had thoughts like “What’s this about? Will this help me? Did I do my job correctly yesterday?” You may have heard various things outside the room; your attention may have been drawn to the postman pushing letters through the box, or whatever. The point about this is that our minds are indeed very unruly and the more you practise this short breathing exercise and the longer you can extend it, the more you will notice how much our minds simply bob about all over the place. When you first do this kind of breathing focusing, it can be quite surprising just how much your mind does shift from one thing to another. This is all very normal, natural, and to be expected. So we need to train the mind and the only thing that is important in this training is not to try to create anything. You are not trying to create a state of relaxation. You are not trying to force your mind to clear itself of thoughts. All you are doing is allowing yourself to notice when your mind wanders and then, kindly and gently, you bring your attention back to focus on your breathing. That’s it! Notice and return. Notice the distractions and return your attention to your breathing. In other words, the exercise is simply an exercise where we learn to focus our attention. You are not trying to achieve anything. If you have 100 thoughts, or 1000 thoughts, that doesn’t matter at all. All that matters is that you notice and then, to the best of your ability, gently and kindly bring your attention back to the breathing. Now, if you practise that ‘attention and return’, ‘attention and return’, gently and kindly you may find that your mind will bounce around less and less. It may become easier, but some days it will be easier than others. Remember, you are not trying to relax as such. All you are doing in this exercise is noticing that your mind wanders, and then returning to the focus on your breathing. So it is ‘notice and return’ and each time it wanders that’s fine, don’t get angry with it, just kindly bring it back to the focus of your breathing.

You can do these exercises at any time and in any place, such as sitting on a bus, or you can do them standing up. Just allow yourself a moment where you focus on your breathing and for your mind to come back to that single focus. You may take an interest in how much of a grasshopper mind you have, but at all times try, to the best of your ability, not to condemn your wandering mind, always be gentle, always kind. Just notice and return. If you have thoughts that you are not doing it right or that it cannot work for you then note these thoughts as typical intrusions and return your attention to your breathing.

The key thing is the mindful attention to the process rather than the result. We can explain that this is a bit like sleeping, where we try to create the conditions that will help us sleep but if we focus too much on whether we are asleep or going to sleep this makes sleep more difficult.

Simple body scan and relaxation

When we are stressed, the body speeds up because usually stress means that the body has detected a threat and is preparing for action. We are now going to explore ways to try and relax, unwind, and soothe ourselves - to give our brain a chance to recuperate. In fact, there are many different ways of relaxing and different types of relaxation. For example, some people like to relax through activity such as pottering around in the garden, swimming, walking in the hills or parks, painting, playing a musical instrument, or socialising. These can help because they take our minds to different non-stressful places.

We can now move on to another exercise using 'notice and return', but this time we're going to focus on allowing ourselves to relax. We are going to look at letting tension go, by this I mean trying not to see tension as a bad thing or our enemy that we have to get rid of but rather as an understandable way that our body tries to protect us (by making your body tense and ready for action). We need to be gentle and help the body understand that it does not need to be like this right now. As we let go of our tension it is like giving the body permission to relax – for which it is grateful!

Exercise 2: Simple body scan and relaxation

Now try once again to focus on your breathing until you click into, find, sense, or feel that rhythm that is most comfortable and soothing for you. If that seems hard, do not worry, just breathe in as comfortable a way as you are able. When you have done that, focus on your legs. Notice how they feel for a moment. Now imagine that all the tension in your legs is flowing down through your legs and down into the floor and away. Let it go on its way. So, as you breathe in, just note any tension and then, as you breathe out, imagine the tension flowing down through your legs and out through the floor. Imagine your legs feeling grateful that they can let go. Sometimes people find that if they slightly tense their muscles as they breathe in, and then relax as they breathe out, this can be helpful. Just spend as much time as you find is helpful to you exploring the idea of letting that tension go with kindness

Now let's focus on our bodies and imagine the tension in our bodies from our shoulders down to our stomach and again, as you breathe out just imagine the tension leaving this part of your body, going down through your legs, down through the floor and away. Again, if it helps, just gently tense your stomach and back muscles as you breathe in and then relax them as you breathe out. In a way it can be like imagining emptying a vessel of the tension that's now running through your legs and down through the floor..... Your body is grateful and you feel kind to it.

Now focus on the tips of your fingers, through your wrists, your arms and elbows and shoulders. Imagine that the tension that was there can be released - can be let go of. So, gently let the tension go so that it can run off down through your body, down through your legs and out through the floor and away.....

Now imagine the tension that sits in your head, neck and forehead. The tension has been your alert system in action and it would like to be released now - to take a rest. So again, as you breathe out, just imagine it running down through your body, down through your legs and out down through the floor.....

Now we can focus on your whole body. Each time you breathe out, focus on the keyword RELAX. Just imagine your body becoming more relaxed..... Okay, Just spend a minute or so doing this.

We will now end this exercise by taking a deeper breath, moving the body around a little and noting how it feels and how grateful it is to you for spending time to try to let go of the tension. When you are ready, get up and carry on with your day.

You can practice this exercise as often as you find it helpful. It can help with sleep too. Keep in mind that if your mind wanders when you do it – just gently bring it back to the task at hand. There are many variations on this basic exercise. It's up to you how you go about exploring different relaxation exercises and finding one that works for you. The one that I've given you is a very basic one and helps some people. The idea is to practise and see what happens for you. When you are trying to relax just 'notice and return' when your mind wanders from focusing and relaxing. As you sit there, allowing yourself to focus on your breathing, you may become more relaxed as you become more familiar with your body, you may become more aware of where tension sits in your body. Gradually you can come to think of your body as a friend, or that you can become a friend to your body, and take an interest in your body and how you can nurture it, care for it and help it relax. Tension is not your enemy to be got rid off because it only came as a form of protection and readying your body for action – so it is grateful for its release from you body. Focus on the feeling of gratitude in your body for doing these exercises.

These ways of *being with our bodies* can also be used when we are engaging in activities. Suppose you have to do the washing up or ironing, we can practice these ways by relaxing while doing these activities rather than being on automatic pilot and ruminating on our difficulties. Developing a relaxed body is a way of being kind and gentle with it and nurturing it.

Compassion Focused Imagery Work

Introducing Imagery

Some key exercises

Compassion focused exercises and imagery are designed to try and create feelings to stimulate a particular kind of brain system through your imagery. You can revisit the section about how our thoughts and images affect our minds and brains and remind yourself of the examples we used to highlight the power of imagery (e.g. the meal). We can try to stimulate our soothing systems in a number of ways and compassion focused exercises are focused in four main ways:

- **Developing the inner compassionate self:** In these exercises we will be focusing on creating a sense of a compassionate self, just like actors do if they are trying to get into a role.
- **Compassion flowing out from you to others:** In these exercises we focus on the feelings in our body when we fill our minds with compassionate feelings for other people.
- **Compassion flowing into you:** In these exercises we focus our minds on opening up to the kindness of others. This is to open the mind and stimulate areas of our brain that are responsive to the kindness of others.
- **Compassion to yourself:** This is linked to developing feelings, thoughts and experiences that are focused on compassion to your self. Life is often very difficult and learning how to generate self-compassion can be very helpful during these times, particularly to help us with our emotions.

Wandering mind

Whenever we try to do certain tasks using our mind a very common difficulty is that our mind wanders all over the place, particularly if we're agitated or restless. Remember that when you begin to do this work, your mind is likely to wander and indeed you might not be able to hold it on task for more than a couple of seconds. As discussed above, not only is that normal but the fact that you notice how much it wanders is part of the training. Also key here is that your intention is simply to try - that's the important thing. Some days you may find it easier than others. The thing is not to worry about that, but just to notice when your mind has wandered and to bring it back to the task at hand.

No clear pictures

Another common concern is that people often don't have clear pictures in their mind when they do imagery. Again this is perfectly normal as we very rarely have clear pictures in our minds; they tend to be more like fleeting impressions, a touch of colour here, or a sense of something there. Imagining hearing things can be easier sometimes, especially imagining people speaking to us. The key focus of this imagery work is on the feelings that we try to generate and that is linked to our intention.

Keep these things in mind when we get to the practice. Now, our first exercise is going to be creating a safe place then we will try to create a compassionate colour.

Safe place and compassionate colour imagery

In this imagery we are going to try to *create a place* in our mind – a place that could give you the *feeling of safeness and calmness*. If you are depressed or distressed those might be difficult feelings to generate, but the act of trying, and the sense of it being the sort of place you would like to be, is the important thing. So remember, it is the act of trying the exercise that is important, feelings may follow later.

The place may be a beautiful wood where the leaves of the trees dance gently in the breeze. Powerful shafts of light caress the ground with brightness. Imagine a wind gently on your face and a sense of the light dancing in front of you. Hear the rustle of the leaves on the trees; imagine a smell of woodiness or a sweetness of the air. Your place may be a beautiful beach with a crystal blue sea stretching out to the horizon where it meets the ice blue sky. Under foot is soft, white, fine sand which is silky to the touch. You can hear the gentle hushing of the waves on the sand. Imagine the sun on your face, sense the light dancing in diamond spectacles on the water, imagine the soft sand under your feet as your toes dig into it and feel a light breeze gently touch your face. Your safe place may be by a log fire where you can hear the crackle of the logs burning and the smell of wood smoke. These are examples of possible pleasant places that will bring a sense of pleasure to you, which is good, but the key focus is on a feeling of *safeness* for you. These examples are only suggestions and yours might be different to these.

Exercise 3: Creating a Safe Place

Engage in your soothing rhythm breathing and when you're ready try to create a place in your mind – a place that could give you the feeling of safeness and calmness.

- Imagine looking around you, what can you see? It might be a beautiful wood where the leaves of the trees dance gently in the breeze. Powerful shafts of light caress the ground with brightness. Or it may be a beautiful beach with a crystal blue sea stretching out to the horizon where it meets the ice blue sky. Or relaxing next to a log fire.
- Now focus on what you can feel, like the sensation of the sun on your face or a breeze caressing your hair. Or can you feel soft, white fine sand underfoot, which is silky to the touch.
- Next think about what you can hear. Can you hear the rustle of the leaves on the trees, or birds, or crackling fire or the gentle hushing of the waves on the sand.
- Now think about whether you can smell anything such as the salty smell of the sea or the smell of wood smoke or a sweetness of the air.
- When you bring your safe place to mind allow your body to relax. Think about your facial expression; allow it to have a soft smile of pleasure at being there.
- Imagine that, *the place itself takes joy in you being here*. Allow yourself to *feel* how your safe place has pleasure in you being here. Explore your feelings when you imagine this place is happy with you being there. Even if it is just a fleeting sense of where the image might be, try to create an emotional connection to this place.

Exercise 4: Compassionate Colour(s)

Engage in your soothing rhythm breathing and, when you're ready, imagine a colour that you associate with compassion, or a colour that conveys some sense of warmth and kindness. Again, it might only be a fleeting sense of colour but when you are ready, imagine your compassionate colour surrounding you. Then, imagine this entering through your heart area and slowly through your body. Or you might prefer to think of colour like a mist or light that just flows through you. As this happens try to focus on this colour as having wisdom, strength and warmth, with a key quality of total kindness. Create a facial expression of kindness on your own face as you do this exercise.

Now, as you imagine the colour flowing through you focus on the feeling that the sole purpose of this colour is to help you, to strengthen you and support you.

Learning to focus on these experiences can be very helpful. If blocks and barriers arise (especially those linked to ideas that you don't deserve it in some way) just recognise these 'distractions' and go back to focusing on your safe place or compassionate colour. Remember that we are trying to stimulate certain brain areas for you in these exercises – that is the point of the exercise. Don't worry if your 'distractions' seem overwhelming at times, just gently smile to yourself, go back to soothing rhythm breathing, and try to stay with the exercise as best you can.

Developing the Compassionate Self

Recognising the different parts of you

You might remember that earlier we talked about there being different parts of you (see page 20). There is an angry part that thinks, feels and wants to act in a certain way; an anxious part; a 'being in love' and a 'falling out of love' part or pattern. We have many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of different potential patterns within ourselves. Developing the compassionate self and the compassionate pattern within ourselves can be key to helping us deal with some of the other feelings and patterns that arise in us that are unpleasant or difficult. Compassion can have a soothing quality on our anger and anxiety, but it can also help us develop courage to face these, and then tolerate them and deal with them. Harnessing your compassionate pattern is about harnessing your wisdom, maturity and genuine desire to be helpful, within yourself. These might be just small seeds or glimmers of a possible self but by working with them they can grow.

There are many different exercises which can be used to develop the compassionate self and for any one person it's not always clear as to which are the best exercises to start with. So, to some extent, we have to experiment. However, a helpful place to start is to focus on developing the sense of compassion within oneself. There are many ways in which this can be done and there are many traditions that use these kinds of techniques. For example, certain schools of Buddhism suggest that the seeds of many types of self exist within 'one self' and it is how we nurture and focus on them that is important. For

example, if you want to be a musician, practice playing an instrument; or if you want to be a good driver, practice driving; or if you want to become a good gardener you would practice gardening. Each is a potential within us until we choose to cultivate this aspect of ourselves. The key then is to think about what we want to practice, what do we want to become within ourselves? You see, throughout much of life we never stop and think about this, we don't think that we can deliberately practice becoming a certain type of person, but we can, we just have to decide to, and then put in the time to practice.

Here we are suggesting that if you choose to develop your inner compassionate self this can help you in many ways. Because of the way our brains are built it will help us to become kinder and have a greater sense of well-being; it may help us to become calmer and more at peace with our feelings. So, the first compassionate imagery exercise can be practiced playfully but also with intent - learning to practice being a compassionate person.

Acting

A very useful way to think about and approach this practice is using *acting* techniques. If you were an actor learning to act, you would pay attention to key elements of a character. This might be a character that is angry, depressed, anxious, happy, joyful, or, of course, compassionate. As a keen actor, what you would try and do would *be to create those experiences within yourself, try to be* or become that character – live it from the inside – for a short while. To do this you might pay attention to the way this character thinks and sees the world, the tone of voice of the character, the postures and the general bearing of the character, the kinds of things they say and the way they say them. The character we are going to become here is a compassionate one; this is the part of us we want to feed, nurture and develop. So to do this we are going to imagine that we are a compassionate person and imagine having certain qualities and characteristic. In our minds we are going to imagine that we have these qualities.

The Compassionate Self

Now if we consider some of the key qualities that make up a compassionate person – there are four key qualities: wisdom, strength, warmth and responsibility.

Wisdom is derived from two aspects, First, if you have been following this workbook you know that all of us *just find ourselves here*, with a 'set of genes' and a very complicated brain that evolved over many millions of years – neither of which we designed or chose. Our sense of self and memories comes from how we have experienced life – the relationships we were born into – again ones we did not choose. Working with some of what goes on in our minds – those powerful emotions, mood shifts, unwanted thoughts or images and painful memories can, through no fault of our own, be difficult. Our wisdom understands this in a deep way - that these things (we did not choose) can be at the root of our suffering.

The second aspect of wisdom is based upon our abilities to be motivated to learn, grow and change. We can spend time thinking and reflecting and recognise that our feelings, and those of others, are often complex, variable, and changeable. We recognise that our emotions can be in conflict – and so it is also the case for other people's emotions. Wisdom enables us to emerge from a limited black and white world into the world of multiple colours, but also greater complexities and uncertainties. Wisdom allows

us to understand the unhelpfulness of self-criticism and to make choices to become more self-compassionate.

Strength is related to fortitude and courage. It can offer us an inner sense of confidence and authority that comes from wisdom. Strength helps to give us a commitment and determination to try to face and to heal suffering. When we imagine our inner strength we might imagine ourselves as older or bigger than we are; we can imagine ourselves coming through our difficulties. We might breathe in a certain way or take a posture that helps us feel confident.

Warmth is related to the feeling and tone of this work. Here we focus on our intention to relieve suffering in a gentle but firm way. Warmth is like an open friendliness, it is not (just) about being nice but having a real desire to be helpful. Creating a compassionate expression and imagining speaking in a warm, friendly and open voice can help us to sense this quality.

Responsibility is related to 'not turning away' from problems but recognising that, although something is 'not our fault', we can make commitment to ourselves and others to do our best to work on it; even small steps at a time. So responsibility taking is not about blaming or criticising (because that is usually focused on things in the past) but is about genuinely wanting to act in ways that are helpful and based on our wisdom, strength and warmth.

Now it can be helpful to practice focusing on each of these and imagine having each of these qualities, in turn, noting what they feel like and any effect this has on your body.

Exercise 5: The Compassionate Self

Find somewhere you can sit quietly and will not be disturbed and focus on your soothing rhythm breathing. When you feel that your body has slowed down (even slightly) and you are ready for your practice, imagine that *you are* a very deeply compassionate person. Think of all the qualities that you would ideally have as that compassionate person. First focus on your desires to become a compassionate person and to be able to think, act and feel compassionately. Next, imagine yourself with each of the qualities noted above. You may find an order you prefer. We will start with wisdom here because this helps to support the other compassionate qualities - but you may prefer to start with warmth.

Imagine being wise and having wisdom – a wisdom that comes from your understanding about the nature of our lives, of our minds and bodies and that there's so much that goes on inside of us which is not our fault (spend time just on this).

Then when you are ready and have a sense of your wisdom (because of your understanding about the nature of suffering), switch to imagining having strength, maturity, authority. Explore your body posture (sitting or standing confidently and assertively) your facial expressions – remember you are *imagining* yourself as a person that understands one's difficulties and those of others, in a non-judgmental way, and has confidence to be sensitive, with an ability to tolerate difficulties

When you are ready, move on to focusing on qualities of warmth – a gentle friendliness. Imagine being warm and kind. Create a compassionate facial expression. Imagine yourself speaking to someone and hear the tone of your voice; imagine reaching out to someone with warmth and know what that might be like.

Then when you are ready switch to imagining a feeling of responsibility. Imagine that you have lost interest in condemning or blaming and are now wanting to do the best you can to help yourself and others move forward in what is often a difficult situation. Hold on to your compassionate facial expression and warmth, focus on this experience of committing yourself to a compassionate path and self development.

Remember, *it doesn't matter if you feel you have these qualities or not*, just *imagine* that you have them. See in your mind yourself having them, and work through them steadily, playfully and slowly. Sometimes we notice how each quality can affect our bodies differently. Remember that you may just get glimmers of things because your mind wanders or you can't really focus. This is very typical of what happens, just like if we were trying to learn to play a piano - we'd be all fingers and thumbs to start with. Regular practice will help.

Compassion under the duvet

Ideally try to practice 'becoming the compassionate self' each day. If our lives are busy we can start by learning what can be called 'compassion under the duvet'. When you wake up in the morning, try to spend a few minutes practicing becoming your compassionate self. As you lay in bed, bring a compassionate expression to your face; focus on your *real desire* to be wise and compassionate. Remember, inside you, you have the capacity for wisdom and strength, but you have to create space for it. Even two minutes a day, if practiced every day, may have an effect. You can also practice when you stand at the bus stop or when you're just lying in the bath. After all, how often do we lie in the warmth of a bath and not really notice because our mind is wandering over all kinds of things – mostly worries or things we need to do. This is not very relaxing! You may then find you'll want to practice for longer periods of time or even perhaps find places where you can train more. Whenever you are aware of it, even sitting in a meeting, you can use soothing breathing and focus on becoming the wisest, compassionate, calm, mature self.

You at your best

Another way you can access and practice your compassionate self is by spending a moment and reminding yourself of a time when you felt compassionate; that is, calm and wise and wanting to help. You can think of your compassionate self as "you at your best", imagining that inner sense of calm and the supportive voice. Use a compassionate expression when you recall this. Don't focus on a time when someone was very distressed because that might focus you on the distress. The aim is to focus on your feelings of *wanting to help* and your kindness. This is called focusing the compassionate self and we are going to explore this in more detail in the next section.

Exercise 6: Compassion Flowing Out

In this exercise we are going to imagine kindness and compassion flowing from you to others. Sit quietly where you won't be disturbed and focus on your breathing. When that's okay for you, try and recall a time when you felt very kind and caring towards someone (or, if you prefer, an animal).

Try not to choose a time when that person (or animal) was very distressed because then you are likely to focus on that distress.

The idea is to focus on the desire to help and feelings of kindness. Keep in mind that it is your behaviour and intentions that are important - and the feelings may follow on behind. Now bring to mind a time when you felt compassionate towards the person (or animal) you have in mind.

- Imagine yourself expanding as if you are becoming calmer, wiser, stronger and more mature, and able to help that person.
- Pay attention to your body as you remember your feelings of kindness.
- Spend a moment expanding with warmth in your body. Note a real genuine desire for this other person to be free of suffering and to flourish.
- Spend one minute, more if you are able, thinking about your tone of voice and the kind of things you said or the kind of things you did or wanted to do.
- Spend one minute, more if you are able, thinking about your pleasure in being able to be kind.
- Now just focus on your desire to be helpful and kind; the sense of warmth; feelings of expansion; your tone of voice; the wisdom in your voice and in your behaviour. When you have finished the exercise you might want to make some notes about how this felt for you.

Focusing the Compassionate Self

We are now going to look at four exercises where we will practice focusing and directing our *compassionate self* and use that to look at, and work with, some of our more difficult feelings and self-experiences. The idea here is to first try to create an inner experience of being the compassionate self (using your breathing, compassionate expression, feelings of strength, sitting up straight etc.) and then, from that position, through the eyes of your compassionate self, look out at the part of you that you want to work with.

Exercise 7: Focusing the Compassionate Self on Others

Find a time and place when you can sit quietly without being disturbed. Now try to create a sense of being a compassionate person, as best you can. Some days this will be easier than others – even just the slightest glimmer can be a start. Now focus and bring to mind someone you care about (e.g. a partner, friend, parent or child, or an animal, or even a plant). When you have them in mind focus on directing towards them three basic feelings and thoughts:

- May you be well
- May you be happy
- May you be free of suffering

Keep in mind that it is your behaviour and intentions that are important - and the feelings may follow on behind. Be gentle, take time and allow yourself to focus on desires and wishes you create in yourself for the other person/animal/plant. Maybe picture them smiling at you and sharing these feelings. Okay, that's tricky if you are thinking of a plant, but imagine the plant as 'happy' to receive your compassionate wishes. Spend time focusing on this genuine desire of yours for 'the other'.

Remember to try to be mindful in the sense that if your mind wanders that is *not* a problem; just gently and kindly bring it back to the task. Try to notice any feelings you have in yourself and your body that emerge from this focusing exercise. Don't worry if nothing much happens at a conscious level, the act of having a go is the important thing. It's like getting fit – it may take some visits to the gym or training before you consciously notice feeling different, but your body will be responding straight away.

Exercise 8: Compassion Flowing into Oneself: Using Memory

Engage in your soothing rhythm breathing for a minute or so or until you can just feel your body slowing down. As you feel your body slowing down, prepare for your compassionate imagery by allowing your body posture to become compassionate. Create your compassionate facial expression. This might involve a slight smile or relaxed posture, but it is a gentle facial expression. You may want to 'play around' with facial expressions and see which one fits for you. When you feel ready, bring to mind a memory of a time when someone was kind to you.

This memory shouldn't be of a time when you were very distressed, because you will then focus on the distress. The point of the exercise is to focus on a desire to help and be kind. Create a compassionate expression on your face and a body posture which gives you the sense of kindness as you recall.

Spend one minute exploring the facial expressions of the person who was kind to you. Sometimes it helps if you see them moving towards you, or see their face breaking into a smile, or their head on one side. Focus on important sensory qualities of your memory in the following way:

- Just focus on the kinds of things this person said and the *tone* of their voice. Spend one minute on that.
- Then focus on the feeling of the emotion in the person, what they really felt for you at that moment. Focus on that for one minute (longer if you wish/can).
- Now focus on the whole experience, maybe whether they touched you or helped you in other ways, and notice your sense of gratitude and pleasure at being helped. Allow that experience of *gratitude* and *joy* in being helped to grow. Remember to keep your facial expression as compassionate as you can. Spend a few minutes with that memory. When you are ready, gently let the memory fade, come out of the exercise, and make some notes on how you felt.

Contrasting memories

You may note that bringing these memories to mind may create feelings inside you, even if they are just glimmers. To demonstrate this, consider what would happen if you focused on how other people have been *unkind* to you? You would clearly create very different feelings inside yourself. The funny thing is that because we don't really pay attention to what goes on in our minds we can allow ourselves to exist (ruminate and dwell) in places where we recall (or anticipate) other people being unkind or threatening to us. That means we spend time stimulating our threat system. When we do that we block out more helpful memories and brain patterns. The questions are: What do we want to train our minds for? Where do we want to exist in the patterns we can create in our minds? Where do we want to shine the spotlight of our consciousness?

Exercise 9: Focusing the Compassionate Self on Yourself

Working with our troubled self

In this exercise we will again spend a few moments engaging the compassionate self - feeling a sense of strength, wisdom and kindness. Remember, it's the intention and desire to be kind and helpful that is important. Notice how your body feels, remember to focus on your facial expressions. When you feel that you have engaged with that part of you to some degree try the following:

Imagine that you are watching a video of yourself, like watching a film. So you see yourself get up in the morning. Holding your position of kindness and compassion, watch your self moving around in your room and then slowly getting on with your day. Notice how the person that you're watching (i.e. you) is troubled by self-critical feelings or thoughts about themselves, perhaps fears of their relationships with others or of being criticised, or their feelings. Be in touch with the struggle of the person you're watching - but just hold your position of inner calmness and wisdom looking out through the eyes of your compassionate self with the intention of being kind and helpful. If that sense of the compassionate self wanders, or you lose it in any way; just let the imagery fade, go back to your soothing breathing rhythm, your compassionate expression, sitting up straight in a confident posture, and begin again.

This exercise will help you take a more objective view of your difficulties and also begin to develop your own intuitive wisdom and abilities to heal. Once we no-longer fight with ourselves but become more accepting, and recognise the struggle that we can have in life (through no fault of our own), we might find it easier to gradually learn how to change.

Working with anxious self

There are many things in life that can make us anxious and one of the ways of working with these things is to do exactly the same as above. Spend some time engaging the compassionate self, feeling yourself slowing down, creating a compassionate facial expression. Now imagine yourself in a situation where you become anxious. Remember to stay in the position of the compassionate self, looking out through the eyes of the compassionate self as it were. Feel compassion for the anxiety that the person in your minds eye (i.e. you) is feeling. Imagine now how you might like to help, what you might like to say to them to help them through this anxiety, to normalise and validate their feelings, to help them recognise they can come through it, and how not to fight with their anxiety.

Now, imagine gradually time moving and you can see yourself gradually reducing your anxiety until eventually time's moved on and the anxiety is gone. Have a sense of compassion for that view you can see in your mind's eye, of how you have come through the anxiety episode. Have a sense of encouragement and understanding that that self has some courage.

Later on, if you're in situations that seem to be making you anxious and are causing you problems, practice switching to your soothing rhythm breathing and spend a few seconds slowing down, reminding yourself of the compassionate self, and looking at the situation through the eyes the compassionate self.

You can practice this in mildly anxiety provoking situations. For example, ending up in queues you don't like, having feelings that are linked to your unhealthy eating, or being in a meeting that's a bit difficult. Again, practise with the easy things first and build up.

The aim of this next exercise is to help you *build up* a compassionate image, for you to work with and develop (you can have more than one if you wish, and they can change over time). Whatever image comes to mind or you choose to work with, note that it is *your* creation and therefore your own personal ideal - what you would really like from feeling cared for or about. However, in this practice it is important that you try to give your image certain qualities. These are superhuman – complete and perfect compassionate qualities that are there for you to practice creating and bringing to mind. They include:

- **A deep commitment to you:** A desire to help you cope with and relieve your suffering, and take joy in your happiness.
- **Strength of mind:** It is not overwhelmed by your pain or distress, but remains present, enduring it with you.
- **Wisdom:** Gained through experience. It truly understands the struggles we go through in life. We all 'just find ourselves here', doing the best we can.
- **Warmth:** Conveyed by kindness, gentleness, caring and openness.
- **Acceptance:** It is never judgemental or critical; it understands your struggles and accepts you as you are. However, remember too that it is deeply committed to help you and support you.

Please don't worry about remembering all of these qualities and emotions because you will be guided through them again when we do the imagery.

Exercise 10: Creating a Compassionate Ideal

First, engage with your soothing rhythm breathing and compassionate expression; bring to mind your safe place, the sounds, the feel, and the sights. Remind yourself that this is your place and it delights in you being here. This may now be the place where you wish to create and meet your compassionate image. You can imagine your image being created out of a mist in front of you, for example. The image may be walking towards you.

Here are some questions that might help you build an image:

- How would you like your ideal caring, compassionate image to look or appear? Would you want your ideal compassionate image to feel/look/seem old or young; to be male or female (or non-human looking, e.g. an animal, sea or light)?
- How would you like your compassionate image to sound? What would be a compassionate voice tone for you?
- Are there any other sensory qualities that would come with your image? Such as colours and sounds?
- How would you like your ideal compassionate image to relate to you? What would help you sense their commitment and kindness for you?
- How would you like to relate to your compassionate image?

Remember your image *really wants* for you to be free of suffering, to be able to deal with the difficulties, and to flourish. It knows that we all just find ourselves here, living as we do, trying to make the best of our minds and lives. It understands that our minds are difficult, that emotions can run riot in us and that this is not our fault.

Practice experiencing what it is like to focus on the feeling that another mind really values you and cares about you unconditionally. Now focus on the idea that your compassionate ideal is looking at you with great warmth. Imagine that they have the following deep desires for you:

- That you be well
- That you be happy
- That you be free of suffering

The key to the exercise *is not* the visual clarity. Indeed some people don't really see their images in any clear way at all. The key to the exercise is the focus, and practice, on the compassionate desires coming into you, imagining another mind wishing for you to flourish. It might help if you use the worksheet in the Appendix to develop your compassionate image.

Now, you might have thought 'yes but this is not real, I want somebody real to care for me'. That is, of course, very understandable and even doing this exercise could make you feel sad. That is because your intuitive wisdom recognises that you are seeking connectedness. The point to remember is that what we are trying to tackle is your own attitudes towards yourself, particularly feelings of shame or self-criticism. While it may indeed be desirable to find people who are caring, it's also very desirable that you create these feelings within you - so that you gradually learn to focus on compassion for yourself, rather than self-criticism. So try not to see it as an 'either or', but as quite different processes between the compassion you give to yourself, and the compassion you'd like other people to give to you.

The Skills of Compassion

Compassionate Attention, Thinking, Behaviour and Feeling

In our groups we will be exploring the use of imagery to develop feelings and ideas of compassion. If you look back to the section on 'what is compassion' you will see that we talked about the skills of compassion in terms of learning how to pay attention compassionately, learning how to think compassionately, learning how to behave compassionately (which will help ourselves and others flourish and improve) and, of course, learning how to create feelings of compassion. So, we can see compassion as directing many of the ways in which we think and react, and we can contrast this with what happens if the threat system takes control. Then our attention, thoughts, behavioural urges and feelings will be linked to anger or anxiety etc. You can see this in Diagram 5 below.

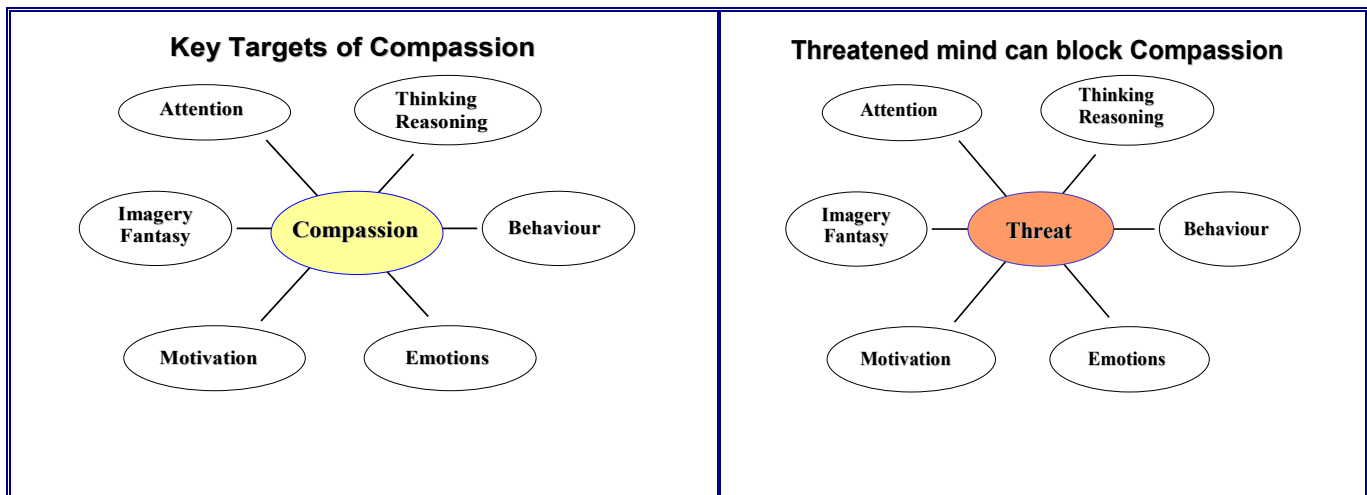


Diagram 5: Compassionate and threatened minds

Our emotions can direct our thinking in many ways. When we're angry we think in angry ways, and when we're anxious we'll think in anxious ways. Compassionate thinking invites us to think in a balanced way so that we are not too biased or emotionally controlled in our thinking.

To help us we can ask ourselves some questions:

- Is this thinking helpful to me?
- Would I think like this if I weren't upset?
- Would I teach a child or friend to think like this?
- If not, how would I like to teach them to think about these things?
- How might I think about this when I am at my compassionate best?

The key point is to try to be mindful of your thoughts and see how they can be pulled in certain ways, according to your feelings, but if you stand back and observe your thoughts with the intention of trying to find a compassionate, fair and balanced approach, with practice you may find this will come for you. There's nothing magic in this and we will do various exercises together using your own wisdom and understanding of compassionate thinking.

Compassionate Thinking

Some people have difficulty reflecting on their feelings and inner experiences. Indeed, for some people this is not a pleasant thing to do and they avoid thinking too much about what goes on in their minds - or the minds of other people. Sometimes this is because they're worried about 'what they might discover' or are worried about 'lifting the lid on things'; sometimes people just feel very sad and overwhelmed and so they don't want to think too much about their feelings – but just change or get rid of them; sometimes there are difficult memories that come up, and sometimes people were never taught 'how' to discuss their feelings or think about them. For example, Sharon who had a weight problem was always given chocolate bars and crisps when she was upset. No-one ever talked to her about her upset or what might be helpful. She rarely remembers having any cuddles when she was upset. Not surprisingly then whenever she had certain emotions she would automatically reach for the biscuits - often unaware of the emotions that were causing her distress. For Sharon her main focus was always to "shut out painful things". Well you can see the problem with this - although it's very understandable it's also going to cut you off from developing your wisdom and learning how to deal with difficulties and emotions, as well as learning about and understanding other people better.

So our first compassion steps might be to recognise that maybe we haven't really had much of an opportunity to think about what goes on in our minds, our emotions can be confusing and, at times, frightening for us, but that if we go step by step, taking a very compassionate approach – not going further than we want to – we can begin to think about our feelings and the kinds of thoughts that go through our minds.

Let's look at some typical ways our minds' can work and how we can recognise that. When we are stressed, harassed and worried, and things go wrong, it is easy for our threat system to take control. Thoughts are then focused on anxiety, anger, or sadness. These can be important and helpful emotions to listen to but also, sometimes as cognitive therapists have noted, they can push our thinking into unhelpful extremes so we lose perspective and balance, and they drive our negative feelings more powerfully. Clearly that is not helpful and so we want to try to keep some balance and not let our emotions or the memories they trigger in us steer us out of balance. Compassionate thinking involves slowing down, learning to become more aware of how our threat emotions, like anxiety or anger, are directing our thoughts. We then choose to intervene by standing back from those emotionally driven thoughts and, as kindly as we can, think about what is helpful. For example, we might think about what we would say or do to help a friend in the same situation. This learning to *stand back from our emotional reactions*, rather than let them dictate our thoughts and ruminations is the key to training our minds.

Some people find it very helpful *to write down the things* that have triggered difficult emotions and to note what thoughts are associated with those difficult emotions. One can then take a few soothing breaths and imagine one's compassionate self or compassionate image and try to come up with some alternatives that help with our feelings and thoughts. You can see some examples of this in the worksheet in the appendices called 'compassion focused thought balancing'. Now the most helpful thing here is not so much focusing on the logic, trying to convince yourself or telling yourself that you're being silly to think as you're thinking. The most helpful thing is to create *an emotional tone of kindness and helpfulness*. Keep in mind all the time that you didn't choose to have a brain that gives you these feelings – your capacity to feel these things *is absolutely not your fault* – there is no "I should feel". However, given that we have this difficult brain it can be very helpful to kindly, gently deep

understanding, stand back from our feelings and the rushing or distress feelings and thoughts’ and tried to become more objective.

Changing self-criticism to compassionate self correction

Basically we’re trying to shift ourselves from threat based thinking to compassion based thinking. This means our thinking is being driven by a different emotional system to that of the threat system. We can see a good example of this when we distinguish between *shame-based self-criticism* and *compassionate self-correction*. As we mentioned in the first part of this document, we all ‘just find ourselves here’, equipped with certain emotions that our genes have built for us, and our life experiences have shaped for us. Much of what goes on in our minds is not our fault. However, people sometimes get the wrong idea about this and believe that nothing matters; if it’s not my fault then it doesn’t matter how we treat ourselves or other. This is *not* the compassionate way. It actually matters greatly because only we can take responsibility and choose our actions to deal with this very tricky brain ours – so that we try as best we can not to cause suffering to our self or others and to promote ours and their welfare. It turns out that if we take that orientation we actually create states of mind within ourselves that help us feel good! So the compassionate way is to take responsibility and try to improve things as best we can by learning from, and building on, our mistakes. If we just get lost in self-criticism and feelings of anger and frustration or disappointment this is not going to be helpful. That is why it is important to distinguish shame-based self-criticism from compassionate self-correction.

Some people believe that self-criticism is the only way to make them do things, to succeed or be good. For example, a person might say, “If I didn’t kick myself, I’d never do anything”. Or they might believe that unless they are critical and keep themselves on their toes, they will become arrogant, selfish and lazy. They use their self-bullying and self-criticism to drive them on – sometimes in rather unkind ways. In some cases, this view goes back to childhood where parents and teachers over-focused on the child’s errors and not on their positives. As a result, the child becomes good at self-criticism and self-punishment but poor at seeing their good points, self-rewarding and valuing.

These distinctions are outlined in more detail in Table 3 below:

<i>Compassionate Self-Correction is Focused on:</i>	<i>Shame Based Self-Attacking is Focused on:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The desire to improve • Growth and enhancement • Forward-looking • Giving with encouragement, support and kindness • Building on positives (e.g. seeing what one did well and then considering learning points) • Focusing on attributes and specific qualities of self • Focusing and hope for success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The desire to condemn and punish • Punishing past errors and often backward looking • Giving with anger, frustration, contempt and disappointment • Focusing on deficits and fear of exposure • Focusing on self as a global sense of self • Focusing on high fear of failure • Increasing chances of avoidance and

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing the chances of engage <p>Note the example of an encouraging, supportive teacher with a child who is struggling (below).</p>	<p>withdrawal</p> <p>Note the example of a critical teacher with a child who is struggling (below).</p>
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Table 3: Distinguishing between compassionate self-correction and shame based self-attacking

You can see that self-criticism is associated with threat-based emotions. Letting go of this type of self-criticism will help you, especially if you focus on *compassionate* self correction; your real desires to do your best and improve. For example, consider two teachers teaching a young child. One focuses on their deficits and picks on them when they make mistakes. The other teacher focuses on what the child does well and encourages the child to improve and learn from their mistakes and offers clear guidance. Which one will help the child’s confidence? Which one do you really prefer? Compassionate self-correction is about being open to all our weaknesses, limitations and fallibilities (remember, we did not design our brains) but with a genuine wish to improve. Hostile self-criticism is just unhelpful and can make us hide away. So practice *compassionate* self-correction when things go wrong for you or that frustration with yourself starts up.

Compassionate self-correction is based on being open-hearted and honest about our mistakes with a genuine wish to improve and learn from them. No one wakes up in the morning and thinks to themselves, “Oh, I think I will make a real cock-up of things today, just for the hell of it”. Most of us would like to do well, most of us would like to avoid mistakes, most of us would like to avoid being out of control with our temper. We need to recognize that our genuine wish is to improve. Self-criticism, on the other hand, comes from a ‘fear-and-anger based place’. It is concerned with punishment and is usually backwards-looking, related to things we have done in the past. The problem is that you cannot change a single moment of the past, you can only change the future.

Distancing and Wise Observing

Another approach for working towards compassionate attention and compassionate thinking involves distancing, standing back and wise observing. As we have seen in our work with imagery, when we think about or imagine something, our bodies and minds can respond as though that mental image were a real thing in the outside world. For example, if I imagine a fresh bowl of pasta has been set down on the table before me, with the wonderful aroma of fine Italian cooking, I might salivate or notice that I’m getting hungry. Similarly, if I tell myself “I am a loser”, or “I know my life is hopeless”, I might feel sad or depressed. We often have habitual patterns of responding to negative thoughts that aren’t very helpful. If I engage in harsh self-criticism, I may see the world “from inside these thoughts”. I may take these thoughts to be literally true. At the same time our bodies can go into different patterns and states which then direct our thinking. While it can be helpful to not take our thoughts at face value, to stand back and imagine ourselves as a compassionate and wise person, and bring kindness and balance to our thoughts, sometimes it can be useful to try to simply stop ourselves from over identifying with our thoughts and feelings.

What this means is to be very clear that our thoughts and feelings are not to be over-identified. We can also learn to view our thoughts as *events in the mind*, rather than experiencing them as literal. ‘Wise observing’ means watching our thoughts as a stream of verbal thinking, rather than looking out at the world from our thoughts. So we see that there are thoughts or emotions that flow through us and then there is the part of us that can notice and become aware and think about those thoughts or feelings flowing through us. Distancing and *wise observations* are based on this idea. Our wisdom comes from being aware that our emotions and motives can flow through us, they have been designed by nature and we don’t need to identify with them – but become more observant of them. Recall Diagram 1.

Breaking identification with ones thoughts

In our work with mindfulness, we have already had some experience in gently observing the flow of our experiences, moment by moment. Defusion, a term coined by behavioural psychologist Steve Hayes, is similar to mindfulness, but is design to help you break the link between thinking something and being taken in by it. When you have a dream, that dream unfolds in your mind, it can be pleasant, scary or odd - but it isn’t “you.” Similarly, our thinking, verbal minds can generate a whole range of thoughts and verbal ideas in us that come and go, rise and fall, but they aren’t who we are.

To have a go at defusion, and separating the nature of yourself from the contents of your mind (e.g., anger, anxiety), try imaging that your mind has it’s you own internal thought and feeling generator. Similar to when we have a stomach ache we think ‘it is our stomach that is aching’ - we don’t think we are an ache. For example, try looking at your mind as producing its own thoughts and feelings: “My mind is telling me that I need to stay inside today”; or “oh, my mind is doing it’s old familiar pattern of regretting my last break-up and blaming me or them”; or “my anxiety generator is telling me not to eat and is flushing my body with anxiety or stubborn determination”. It can also be helpful to verbally speak out loud your feelings. “I am having a flush of anxiety which means that my body has picked up a threat and is now feeding adrenalin into me. I can see how this is working to make my stomach have butterflies – this is exactly how the threat system was designed to work out – so it is not my fault. I can notice how the feelings are pulling my thoughts to try to focus on..... This is typical of anxiety”. By learning to stand back and become more descriptive and talking about your experiences you’re learning to defuse the feelings and not over-identify with them.

Taking your keys with you

Grab your key-ring and match each challenging thought and feeling to one of the keys. As you go about your day, recognize that you are carrying these sometimes troubling mental events with you, just like you are carrying your keys. You need to carry your keys in order to function in your day, just like you need to carry these thoughts. Notice the thoughts, and your ability to carry them, whenever you notice the keys.

Singing

Sometimes to help to break up a particular flow of thinking and to change your focus, you can sing your thoughts. “I am having thoughts that I did not do that so well. I should not have had that extra chocolate cake in the restaurant. I’m feeling fat”. Try different tunes. Again the idea is to help you recognize that the flow of thoughts and feelings can be broken up and you do not need to over identify with them, get stuck with them, go with them, or simply act them out. That part of you that can observe your thought

might have ideas of what might be helpful and in your compassionate best interests – once you stand back and listen for it.

Facial expressions

Facial expressions can be very helpful because the muscles of your face are connected to your brain. It's always helpful to try to create a compassionate facial expression and hold that for a few minutes at least. One patient also noted that if they made very exaggerated facial expressions, almost like a clown, this helped them to break up the difficult emotions.

Experiment

These are just some ideas but it is useful if you always keep in mind that the flow of your emotions and your thoughts are partly linked to brain design and you don't have to over-identify with them or stay locked into them. The thing here is to not take your thoughts at face value, get trapped in them and to lose balance. Key is to try things for yourself, experiment, and take an open, curious and playful, but not devaluing, approach to it and find your own way with these ideas.

In general there are a number of ways we can compassionately work with our thoughts and feelings. We can learn to notice them and how they roll in on us – then stand back and refocus on our compassionate mind to bring more balance to our thinking. However, can also simply notice the arising of our thoughts and feelings and learn how to become more of a wise observer, and separate our selves from the flow of thoughts and feelings – not be taken in by any 'felt reality' to them.

Compassionate Letter Writing

Here is another example of a practice that can help you orientate yourself to a compassionate way of thinking and help you balance your three main emotion systems. Keep in mind that all the exercises and work that we are doing is to develop a compassionate mind - that pattern within ourselves that will help us understand ourselves better, be more accepting and, when necessary, find the courage to face up to and tackle the difficult things in our lives. Everything is orientated for that – developing the compassionate part of us (think of that green circle - see Diagram 2) in the way we think, our behaviours and our intentions. We are training our minds.

There is now good research showing that expressive writing can be very helpful to people. Indeed, many of us write diaries from time to time – noting our thoughts and feelings. Writing about experiences can help us to come to terms with them. The question is how to write? We could just write all the negatives and then not feel so good. You could also write about things that you feel good about - and that can be extremely helpful to help us get more balance in our lives. For example, we might write a gratitude letter or an appreciation letter – even if we don't intend to send it. We need to learn to write from a particular perspective - and of course here it is learning to write to ourselves from a compassionate perspective that really helps. We deliberately try to create that frame of mind. There are different ways you can write this letter, here we will explore writing as your compassionate self and as your compassionate image.

Compassionate self

Take your pen and paper and then spend some moments engaged with your soothing rhythm breathing. Next, move into your compassionate self; remembering you at your best, at your calmest, at your wisest, at your *most caring*. Imagine yourself as you would *ideally* like to be in terms of being mature and powerfully compassionate. Now try to feel your compassionate self. As you focus on it, feel yourself expanding slightly and feeling stronger. Imagine you *are* a compassionate person who is wise, kind, warm and understanding. Consider your general manner, warm tone of voice, and the feelings that come with your 'caring compassionate self'. Adopt a kind facial expression. Try to feel the kindness in your face before moving on. Think about the qualities you would like your compassionate self to have. Spend time feeling and gently exploring what those qualities are like when you focus on them. Remember, it does not matter if you actually feel you are like this, but focus on the *ideal* you would like to be. Remember it's our focus – what we bring to mind - that affects our brain – just like when actors act as if they're angry or anxious or happy – they are stimulating their brains. It is your intentions that are important – feelings may follow with practice. Spend as long as you feel able and comfortable, thinking about those parts of yourself. Don't worry if this is difficult, just do the best you can – have a go.

When we are in a compassionate frame of mind (even just slightly) or in a pattern of trying to help a friend or someone we care for, we try to use our personal experiences of life wisely. We know that life can be hard; we offer our strength and support; we try to be warm and not judgemental or condemning. Now, just take a few breaths and try to sense and feel that wise, understanding compassionate part arise in you. This is the part of you that will write the letter. We try to write this kind of letter from a compassionate point of view. If thoughts of 'am I doing it right?' or 'I can't get much feeling here' arise, just note or observe these thoughts as normal comments our minds like to make, but re-focus your attention and simply observe what happens as you write, as best you can. There is no right or wrong, only the effort of trying – it is the practice that helps. As you write, try to create as much emotional warmth and understanding as you can. You are practising writing these letters from your compassionate side.

As you write your letter, try to allow yourself to *understand and accept* your distress. For example, your letter might start with:

'I am sad. I feel distressed; my distress is understandable because.....'

Note the reasons. Realising your distress makes sense. Then, perhaps you could continue with:

'I would like me to know that.....'

For example, your letter might point out that as we become stressed or depressed, this can come with a powerful set of thoughts and feelings – so how you see things right now may be the depression view on things. Given this, we can try and step to the side of the distress and focus on how best to cope. So we can write: 'It might be helpful to consider. . .' We can then focus on the things that would be helpful. For example, Clare had suffered a real setback when her partner of three years sadly walked out on her unexpectedly and she discovered he had been having an affair at work. On top of this, having never voiced dissatisfaction before, he blamed her completely. She felt devastated and also began to feel that maybe it was her fault, she should

have seen it coming, maybe she was unlovable, and then when she became mildly depressed and very tearful she felt she wasn't coping and other people went through these things without falling apart as she was. When Clare had to take time off work she beat herself up even more for letting people at work down. However, Clare was able to write to herself from a compassionate point of view. At first she imagined she was writing to somebody else – maybe a friend who had gone through exactly the same difficulty. Later she began to think about writing for herself. Here are some of the themes that she wrote about (remember the details are always changed to protect the identity of people, this is just to give you ideas).

'Dear me

What I've been through is terrible and would be terrible for any one. It's very understandable why I feel like I feel - it's going to take me time to adjust to this shock –that's it - I'm in shock actually. It affects my whole body – all my emotions are just have thrown in the air - my thoughts never stop. But that's not because there's anything wrong with me, that's what happens in situations like this – painful and difficult because it is compassionate if I learn to accept this rather than fight with myself about my feelings and what I should and shouldn't feel. This is hard because this *is* hard. (*Remember that Clare needs to hear this with a kind, understanding, gentle tone in her mind*)

When I think about it, people at work have been genuinely understanding and very kind. They realise that I need time to sort my head out and, sure it's inconvenient for them, but I know I would do the same for somebody else. It would help me if I allow myself to experience *their kindness* rather than keep focusing on my guilt.

The more I think about it I can understand why Richard blamed me because he was one of those people that always blame somebody else if things went wrong for him. I'm not really doing him any favours or me if I simply go along with that. There may be things to learn from this – maybe I was a little gullible and dependent, and that's not my fault and its not my fault somebody exploited that. However, I have an opportunity now to work through this and think about how I would like to be in the future. '

Also of course it would help for Clare to be 'mindful' noticing how the body responds with these emotions and thoughts when in shock. This can help the tendency to be self blaming or try to over regulate what the body is trying to do.

Compassionate image

A second way of writing compassionate letters to yourself is to imagine your compassionate image writing to you, imagining a dialogue with them, and what they will say to you. Remember, sometimes people don't have much of an image so it's just sensing your image with you, focused on your well-being and recognising the nature of the difficulty you are struggling with. Imagine the sound of the voice or any communication that comes from them as wise, strong, with great warmth and kindness, never judgment, always understanding and looking for the helpful way forward. For example, my compassionate image might say something like:

'Hi Paul,

Gosh, the last few days have been tough. Isn't it typical of life that problems seem to arrive all at once rather than one at a time? It's understandable why you're feeling down because.... Hang in there because you are good at seeing these as the ups and downs of life. There have been times before when things have seemed dark but they pass and you have shown a lot of courage in dealing with this very tricky brain that is so tough at times. You have developed abilities for getting through this and tolerating the painful things.'

You will note that the letter points to *my* strengths and *my* abilities. It doesn't issue instructions such as: '*You must* see these things as the ups and downs of life'. This is important in compassionate writing. You don't want your compassionate letters to seem as if they are written by some smart bod who is giving you lots of advice! There has to be a real appreciation of your suffering, a real appreciation of your struggle and a real appreciation of your efforts at getting through. The compassion is a kind arm round your shoulders, as well as re-focusing your attention on what is helpful for you. Keep in mind all the time that the emotional tone that you hear the words in should be warm, kind, gentle, understanding and wise – that is compassionate – keep a focus on the emotion all the time.

An example

Here's a letter from someone we'll call Sally, about lying in bed feeling depressed. Before looking at this letter let's note an important point. In this letter we are going to refer to '*you*' rather than '*I*'. Some people like to write their letters like that, as if writing to someone else. See what works for you, but over time try to use '*I*'.

'Good morning Sally,

Last few days have been tough for you so no wonder you want to hide away in bed. Sometimes we just get to the point of shutdown, don't we, and the thought of taking on things is overwhelming. You know you have been trying real hard but have felt exhausted through no fault of your own, I mean you haven't put your feet up with a gin and tonic and the daily paper. I guess the thing now is to work out what helps you. You've shown a lot of courage in the past in pushing yourself to do things that you find difficult. Lie in bed if you think that it can help you, of course, but watch out for critical Sally who could be critical about this. Also you often feel better if you get up, tough as it is. What about a cup of tea? You often like that first cup of tea. Okay, so let's get up, move around a bit and get going and then see how we feel. Tough, but let's try. . .'

So you see the point here: It's about understanding, being helpful, having a really caring focus, but at the same time working on what we need to do to help ourselves. You might write this one in your head – imagine a really kind and understanding part talking with you. At other times it is useful to actually use a pen and paper and write to yourself.

Guide to your letter writing

When you have written your first few compassionate letters, go through them with an open mind and think whether they actually capture compassion for you. If they do, then see if you can spot the following qualities in your letter.

- It expresses concern and genuine caring.
- It is sensitive to your distress and needs.
- It is sympathetic and responds emotionally to your distress.
- It helps you to face your feelings and become more tolerant of them.
- It helps you become more understanding and reflective of your feelings, difficulties and dilemmas.
- It is non-judgemental/non-condemning.
- A genuine sense of warmth, understanding and caring permeates the whole letter.
- It helps you think about the behaviour you may need to adopt in order to get better.

Self-critical people can struggle with this to begin with, and are not very good at writing compassionate letters. Their letters tend to be rather full of finger-wagging advice. We have to work at this and practise. The point of these letters is not just to focus on difficult feelings but to help you reflect on your feelings and thoughts, be open with them, and develop a compassionate and balanced way of working with them. The letters should not offer advice or tell you what you should or shouldn't do. It is not the advice you need, but the support to act on it.

Getting started

There is nothing rushed in letter writing – just take your time. We find that sometimes people sit staring at a blank page not sure what to write because they're 'over thinking' in their heads of 'what to write'; how to write or worried about spelling – or telling themselves they can't write. This is the evaluative mind trying to work it all out in advance. There is no right or wrong here and you might have a number of starts before you get into flow. So it is useful to start with: "Dear (your name), I know you have been feeling....." and then almost let the pen write itself. Just write what you would really like somebody who's really kind and understanding to say to you.

If you're struggling with flow just write whatever comes into your mind. The key here will be to try to work around a tendency to self monitor and judge if you doing it right or not – that judging can make it more difficult for you. Just write –you can always throw it away if you don't like it and you can have as many go's as you want. It's useful to just start writing regardless of whether or not you know what you're going to write – in fact, in many ways, it's a good idea not to work it out in advance.

Getting into the flow is like allowing your writing hand to do the work rather than your head; so you will be writing as you think. As I say the biggest block to this is people trying to have too much clarity before they start. So just writing regardless of whether it seems sensible or makes much sense, and then slowly the flow may come

Recognising Emotions

Do you remember that in Section One we noted that there are many different parts to ourselves and we can feel lots of different things to the same events? We are not simple creatures! Let's do some work on this now. We are generally used to thinking about single emotions to particular events – e.g., that this event made us angry or anxious or sad but also it is not uncommon that we could actually have all three! Our emotions can be more complex than only having one emotion at a time. Imagine that you have an argument with a partner or someone you like. Your dominant emotion may well be anger or irritation but do you think there might be other emotions in your mind too - somewhere! Let's stand back for a moment and think about this. Bring to mind a situation that caused you an upset - maybe a conflict with somebody. Now ask yourself 'was there an angry part of me present at the time and what does/did that angry part think and want me to do?' Now put that to one side and think to yourself 'was there an anxious part of me present and what does or did that anxious part want me to think and do?' Then put that to one side. Next ask yourself 'was there a sad part of me present and what does or did that part want me to think or do? Was there a part to me that thought I was being unfair, or the other person was being unfair?'

We can show that we can have different emotions by drawing them out as a circle to show that to any particular event or upset we can have multiple feelings and thoughts (see Diagram 6).

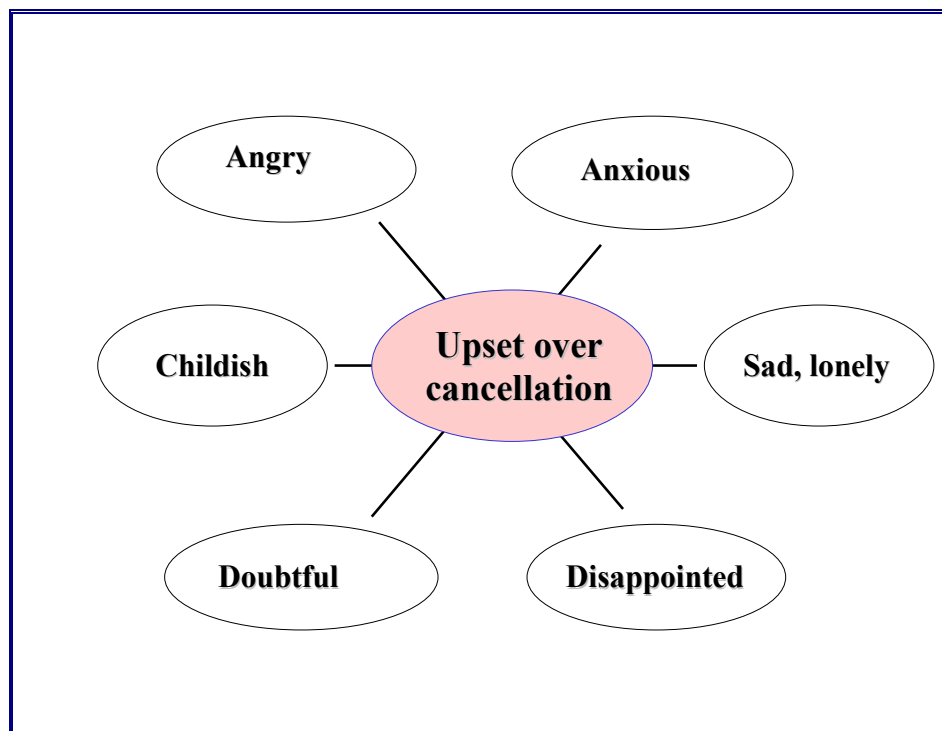


Diagram 6: Multiple feelings to an event

Here is an example from somebody we can call Carol. She had a minor argument with her twenty year daughter whom she had a close relationship with about feeling let down about a lunch date. Her daughter cancelled at the last moment because she chose to go and see someone else linked to her work. Carol's first flush of feelings were anger and disappointment, but very quickly other feelings emerged. The cancellation brought home to her that she been feeling lonely, and now was sad at not being able to see her daughter. She was also feeling anxious that her daughter might find her a bit of a burden. She was doubtful as to how much she should express her feelings to her daughter. There was

another part of her that thought she was being very childish because clearly her daughter has her own life to live.

From this simple example we can see that sometimes our minds can be full of very different feelings and conflicting thoughts. Learning to recognise that we are more technicoloured and complex can be helpful to us because sometimes one emotions can drown out the others. This is why it's important is to spend time with our minds, becoming more mindful and aware that we can have these different multi-thoughts and feelings.

Learning to pay attention to the many thoughts, feelings and ideas that go on in our minds can be helpful because if we are (say) angry we can miss the fact that we're also sad or anxious. Sometimes if we are very anxious with somebody we miss the fact that we also feel very angry with them and want to be assertive. Indeed we might be anxious because in the background we feel angry! So as a rule of thumb always assume that your emotions are more complex than they may at first seem. Learning to recognise these different feelings, that can be in conflict, can be helpful.

It's very common for us to have a conflict of feelings. For example, you've broken up with partner and part of you is angry and feels they weren't actually that helpful to you but another part is lonely, you miss them and maybe want to get back with them. Part of you wonders if you were the cause in some way and part of you is clear - it was them – yet another part may recognize it's not really anyone's fault it's just that you weren't well suited for one reason or another. We can also be in conflict over positive things too. You are excited by the prospect of a new job but anxious of leaving the old one; or maybe you have the choice of jobs and can't decide which to go for. In fact, we can often have various conflicts between different feelings or between the advantages and disadvantages of doing certain things. This is very common. We also know that these kinds of conflicts and dilemmas can be very stressful and people can ruminate about them – again this is all very normal and typical of being human.

The point is learning to be compassionate to the many different emotions we can feel for the same thing and for our conflicts; to recognise them as normal, to recognise them as being stressful and difficult. The way to help ourselves with them is not to be self-critical for getting stuck with them, to be open and talk to others about them, to look at the advantages and disadvantages and so recognize that sometimes change does involve cost and that's where compassionate courage can come in. It can also help if we imagine what life would be like if we resolved the conflict, or learn to live with it in a different way. Use your compassionate self and compassionate image, be mindful to explore and observe the conflict – in a non critical and open minded way.

Compassionate Behaviour

Okay, so we have been looking at our thoughts, how we can use imagery and how we can write to ourselves. What about behaviour? How can we develop compassionate behaviour? As we have frequently mentioned, it is our intentions and our behaviours that matter, even if we don't always have the feelings to go with them. Compassionate behaviour is about doing things to help ourselves and/or others to deal with suffering or develop, flourish and improve.

Remember that there will be times when you're angry or frustrated and don't want to carry through on your commitment to looking after yourself properly. This is understandable of course, but, to the best of your ability, notice and be compassionate to your anger and frustration. Sometimes we just need to have some time to let things settle down; like sailing in a storm, we just have to wait for it to blow over. If the feeling is to give up on any commitment you've made, allow yourself to settle and then rekindle your commitment.

It can also help if we think about our *values* and deciding on what it is we really want to work for - sometimes we are not clear - so it can be helpful to think about this over the long term. How would you like to be in six months or a year? Remember to keep a lightness of touch, to be playful and hopeful.

Here are some specific things that you could try:

- Each day do one spontaneous act of kindness to yourself and others – be clear that it is kindness though and not just self-indulgence.
- Each day, where possible, speak to someone – find out a little bit about them.
- Do one thing, no matter how small, that you think will help you to reach a longer term goal.
- Practise one act of forgiveness to yourself or others each day, no matter how small, especially if you tried and you weren't as successful as you wanted to be or if you had a relapse of some kind.
- Do one thing, no matter how small, which is specifically designed by you to be enjoyable.
- Set time aside to practise some of your exercises.
- Spend five minutes remembering kindnesses that occurred in the day that went well.

Practice and Practice Diaries

The most important and helpful way to begin to train your mind is to change your behaviour. For example, you might want to try to do one compassionate thing for yourself and somebody else each day - even if you don't feel like it. It actually doesn't matter! For example, if you regularly exercise - even on those days you don't want to – you will still get fit because you're stimulating certain systems in your body. Now you might say 'but if I don't feel compassionate then my behaviour is not genuine'. Well it is often behaving compassionately even when we don't really want to that makes it even more compassionate! The point is until you have developed the systems in yourself how could you feel them? So there is something of a chicken and egg argument here.

You can become more of what you would like to be *when what you practice*. You can consider how are you are going to 'feed' the different systems in your brain. You can practise paying attention to what goes through your mind rather than letting it start one of its anxious or angry whirlpools. Keep in mind at all times the need to practice and getting caught up in these whirlpools of feelings and moods is not your fault – it is the way the brain is designed –so you're learning how to deal with a not particularly well designed brain! Using your attention and desire to become wise and compassionate will guide you in this endeavour.

Practice diaries are a way to keep notes about some of the exercises you will try, and they can help you see how you are getting on. People often keep diaries to think and write about their thoughts, especially if they're down. It can also be useful, however, to keep notes of your practice, your personal observations, what you're compassionate, wise mind says, and your successes, no matter how small.

Fear of, and Blocks to, Compassion

Some people recognise that they are simply not used to a compassionate way of thinking and it seems odd to them, but they can understand its value and the importance of practice. However, other people can be much more resistant. For example, they may feel they do not deserve to be compassionate, they may see it as a weakness, or a self-indulgence, or even selfishness. If these beliefs are strongly held they can get in the way of practice.

One way around this is to simply note these beliefs as common, but to practice anyway. Think about it like physiotherapy. If you had a weak muscle in your leg, perhaps as a result of injury, you wouldn't tell yourself that you don't deserve to have a stronger muscle. So let's build these qualities, and then if you decide you don't want to use them, that's up to you. However, you cannot *make a choice* of being non-self-compassionate unless you also have the *ability* to be self-compassionate.

For some people kindness begins to touch them in a deep way and can make them sad and even tearful. This is because it touches an inner wisdom, which is that many of us wish to be cared for, cared about and want to feel connected to others. When we feel distressed, depressed, anxious or lonely, being kind to ourselves can open us up to that loneliness and yearning inside of us for reconnection. If possible, just stay with these feelings and mindfully allow them to come through. If you find them a bit much for you then you may prefer to work first with the safe place imagery in 'becoming the compassionate self'. However, always trying to create 'kindness and helpfulness in our thinking' is key.

Some people are unsure about kindness because when they were children their parents could be kind one day but horrible the next. So feelings of kindness and horribleness are kind of mixed up together. This means that as they begin to feel kindness they can also experience the feelings of horribleness coming back as well. Here you need to just keep your focus on the feelings of kindness, notice other feelings creeping in, smile compassionately and bring the attention back to exactly what it is *you want* to focus on. Again, if this seems like it could be a problem for you, then stay with the processes that you find tolerable and build up from there. *Only go with things you feel comfortable with.*

Another major block to compassion can be *anger*. Self-critical, depressed and anxious people can sometimes struggle with anger, and even struggle with admitting that they feel angry about things. I have certainly met many people who have thoughts that it's not compassion they want to develop, but to find a way to fight back, to stand up for themselves or even get their own back on people who have hurt them! Sometimes this anger is just a desire to be acknowledged and appreciated, and sometimes people are frightened of their anger, and that too can sometimes block compassion. So, for such folk, doing compassion exercises can actually make them feel a bit ashamed of their anger because they feel that if they are compassionate they shouldn't feel angry. This is a misunderstanding of compassion.

Some people believe that in order to be compassionate they have to be 'nice people' and nice people shouldn't feel angry, or irritable or unreasonable. They come to compassion training thinking that they have got to practice being nice people and get rid of their anger. However, compassion is actually about being honest and open to our anger, without self-judgement, but at the same time taking responsibility for what we do with that anger.

The ability to acknowledge that we have great anger or rage can itself be a compassionate thing to do because it's taking ourselves seriously and with honesty. The Dalai Lama (the head of the Buddhist community who is renowned for his compassion) tells a story of how he used to like to fix watches. One day, after working on a watch that he was struggling with, he found his frustration mounting, until he picked up a hammer and smashed the watch to pieces! You see it's not so much whether or not we have frustration, anger or rage, it's how we acknowledge it, our attitudes to it and how we express it that's important. Recognising how painful rage can be *is* compassionate. Coming to terms with the fact that anger rumination is harmful to us *is* compassionate; learning what to do about our anger *is* compassionate. Compassion *is not* about trying to soothe everything away or sweep things under the carpet! We have a difficult brain and anger can be powerful, which is why we need compassion for it.

Sometimes people think that the compassionate approach is letting them off the hook, that it's a soft and easy option. It's far from it. If you suffer from agoraphobia the compassionate approach is not to give up and sit in front of the television eating chocolate, as nice as that might be for a short time. The compassionate approach is to acknowledge that you are going to have to work with your anxiety and to practice getting out more and more each day. *Compassion helps us to develop the courage we need to develop in order to confront and work with things we might be avoiding.* So, whoever told you compassion was a weakness or a simple option has misled you I'm afraid. Compassion is about honesty and developing courage, which is not always easy.

Rather than think of compassion as something fluffy, easy or soft, see it as how, through kindness, we can learn to face our powerful anxieties and rages, the difficulties and tragedies of our lives and gradually find some peace within. There is nothing soft or weak about this journey and sometimes it can move us in deep ways.

Summary

We have seen that we have a very difficult brain because of the way it has evolved over many millions of years. Within us are different patterns and potential states of mind. There is the angry self, the anxious self, the 'wanting to be loved self', the excited self, the proud self, the ashamed self - all of which come with slightly different emotions, ways of thinking and desires to behave. These can also be affected by our background bodily states - whether we're exhausted or have a physical problem. Powerful emotional memories can also be triggered in us that affect our bodies and emotions. If we come from difficult backgrounds, some of the states of mind we typically experience are rooted in anxiety and anger, because we haven't had the chance to develop other patterns and we've always been 'on the defensive'.

Noticing the process of change

As people begin to work on the psychological difficulties they often realise that they go through a series of steps and stages on the way to changing.

Stage one People realise that their emotions or behaviours are a problem. At first we may simply justify our feelings and act out whatever we feel. Sometimes people are in denial and sometimes people just genuinely lack insight. These individuals rarely come to therapy because they don't think they have a problem or they think everybody else has the problem.

Stage two Begins when we realise that *we are suffering* in some way, that our emotions are difficult for us and we get caught up in them like a fast flowing river. So if somebody upsets us we simply become angry without really thinking about whether our reactions are helpful or unhelpful. We may reach for the biscuit tin, cigarette, glass of wine, or ruminate on our anger. However, even though we feel we can't do much to stop our rumination regulator emotions we are aware *that we want* to try to feel better because we suffer from these reactions. We recognise that we need to work on ourselves

Stage three: Arises when we start to notice the typical triggers of our reactions; maybe our *feeling states*, maybe things that people say to us, or stresses in our life. We recognise these are reactions arising within *our own mind* and we know to give ourselves some space not to act them out. We gradually become able to feel things strongly but not necessarily act on those feelings. This doesn't mean simply not doing anything or holding on to things that are upsetting – rather, it means finding ways of helpfully and assertively dealing with the issue. In this way our we're making decisions about our actions rather than letting our emotions making those decisions. It's as if part of our mind becomes more observant and slightly above the reactions going on in our mind. So, we have made the transition from lack of awareness - to awareness of suffering -to awareness of it arising in our mind to - an awareness that we don't have to act on our emotions - to giving ourselves training in our observing our minds.

Stage four: Arises when we begin to see that in developing a compassionate sense of self we gain ways of working with troublesome emotions so that they settle more quickly. Then, overtime, we start to notice that we don't react in quite the same urgent ways that we used to. We begin to practise compassionate attention, compassionate thinking, and compassionate behaviour - opening ourselves up to sensitively think about the minds of other people and our own in new ways.

Stage five: We recognise this is a developmental journey that we are on and that some days it goes better than others; all of us can get blown off course from time to time. However we have learnt that self-criticism serves little purpose in comparison to compassionate self-improvement. We increasingly make our home in a sense of compassion. After all, remember you did not design your brain, it's a tricky, difficult mind at the best times; you did not choose to have the early life experiences you had that have shaped your memories and feelings. However today you can choose to set sail to develop you compassionate mind.

Appendix



Worksheet for building your compassionate image

How would you like your ideal caring, compassionate image to look/appear – visual qualities?

How would you like your ideal caring, compassionate image to sound, e.g. tone of voice?

What other sensory qualities can you give to it?

How would you like your ideal caring, compassionate image to relate to you?

How would like to relate to your ideal caring, compassionate image?



Compassion Focused Thought Balancing – An Example

These are examples of how to identify difficult thoughts and then think of some compassionate alternatives. You may well think of others. We have two examples here. One related to doing the imagery work and another to eating too much

Trigger	Unhelpful / distressing thoughts	Helpful / kind thoughts (try to create warm tone)
Trying to engage with Compassionate Self Imagery and struggling.	I don't feel anything.	This is distressing - to be trying so hard and having these fears. Commonly when we start this sort of practice we can over-worry and check on whether it's going well or not or whether we are doing it correctly or not, and this can cause problems. At least I'm having a go.
	I've missed something.	These difficulties are common so it's not just me, in fact they are normal and even expected experiences – so it is not that I have 'missed something'.
	What am I supposed to feel?	There is no 'supposed to', it's more 'playing and exploring and seeing' what feelings and images come to mind. 'Supposed to' means that I am looking for something particular rather than exploring. Each person is different. I can just encourage myself to stay with the exercise and practice as often as I can.
	I'm not engaging with it properly, therefore I will be stuck.	It is the practice that is important and to see what happens – it is still early days – it is not about being stuck.
	I'm not in touch with my feelings.	I am very in touch with some feelings (e.g. irritability with struggling with this) but am learning how to be more in touch with my compassion side and it will take time.
	Does it work for others?	This approach has worked for others can (caution: this can be helpful but may provoke counter response "but I bet it won't work for me")



Trigger	Unhelpful / distressing thoughts	Helpful / kind thoughts (try to create warm tone)
<p>Eating too much and having weight problems (common to many of us!)</p>	<p>I'm useless</p> <p>I've got no willpower, no self-control</p> <p>I'm always going to be like this, I might as well give up</p> <p>I'm different to other people and feel very alone.</p>	<p>It is distressing to feel like this - but I have a brain that's designed to enjoy eating a variety of foods in all kinds of situations – the food industry has spent billions of pounds enticing all of us to eat unhealthy foods that put on weight very easily! –whereas my brain was designed millions of years ago with food shortages really. This is why so many people today have this problem –it really is not my fault. It would be help me to be gentle with myself and work as best I can - step by step way to find what will help my eating to become more healthy –blaming myself like this is really because and disappointed and angry.</p> <p>I have felt like this before and come though it so have more courage than I am giving myself credit for. This feeling is a reflection of my disappointment – so I can be mindful and think would help friend who felt like this –sometimes we do just have bad days and have to ride!</p> <p>I learned to hide my feelings in the past to protect myself but now I am learning new ways. When we feel down it is very common to feel alone –in that I am not alone! I am becoming more compassionate and caring of myself and feelings. That's what I want to be like</p> <p>This is a very understandable feeling. maybe it also a reflection or a memory of how I have felt in the past –even as a child maybe. So I can see how I feel like this. But it helps if I reach out to other people as best I can – not hide away – become mindful and kind with these feelings but not see them as the a major truth</p>

Now remember, the key thing with this approach is *the emotional tone*: so when you read through your thoughts don't worry too much about whether you believe them or not (not that we're trying to create inaccurate thoughts of course). The key thing is the kindness, understanding and support you can feel in your helpful thoughts – sometimes life is just very difficult – and it's not about controlling our thoughts, but doing things that are helpful to us; finding the compassionate path to cope with life's difficulties.



Compassion Focused Thought Balancing

Trigger	Unhelpful / distressing thoughts	Helpful / kind thoughts (try to create warm tone)

Compassion Practice Diary - Example Sheet



DAY	Type of Practice Time and how long	Comments What was helpful
THURSDAY	10am Soothing Rhythm Breathing Compassionate self	<i>I felt calmer, less stressed. Noticed mind wandering but managed to keep focusing on breathing. Tricky to get started but began to see the point – thought about someone I wanted to be compassionate to.</i>
FRIDAY	Soothing Rhythm Breathing in bed Compassionate self on the bus	<i>Mixed today as busy. Useful to slow down and refocus and think about the self I would like to be. Able to get in touch with a desire in myself to be kind and calm. Recognised that I can be quite self-critical, but can slow down and re-focus.</i>
SATURDAY	Very busy In the bath – 15 mins compassionate relaxing	<i>Did occasionally think about being mindful and taking a moment to 'slow down'. Also thought about my compassionate colour.... But lots to do with the family. Only thought about it towards the end.</i>
SUNDAY	Weekends very busy with family so no specific time	<i>Trying to think about compassion at different points in the day.</i>
MONDAY	11am – half hour focussed on both compassionate self and compassionate imagery	<i>Recognise I need to spend time to practice. When I can make time it does help. Working with my image was difficult, tended to come and go, but just allowed that to happen and began to have a sense of an image rather than seeing anything clearly.</i>
TUESDAY	Similar to Monday	
WEDNESDAY	2pm – compassionate self	<i>Have a friend who's been having difficulties so practiced imagining compassionate self and just being compassionate to them. Felt I could sense this desire in me for her to feel better. Recognising I do have those feelings. Felt good</i>
Comments on weeks practice	<i>Trying to bring my practice into every day life as well as setting time aside. Recognising that it's about remembering to attend and focus on compassionate things.</i>	

Date:



Compassion Practice Diary

DAY	Type of Practice Time and how long	Comments What was helpful
THURSDAY		
FRIDAY		
SATURDAY		
SUNDAY		
MONDAY		
TUESDAY		
WEDNESDAY		
Comments on weeks practice		

Recommended Reading and Further Information

Books

Mindfulness

There are lots of books on mindfulness. Some classics are:

- Thich Nhat Hanh (1991). *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. London: Rider.
- Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005). *Coming to Our Senses: Healing ourselves and the world through mindfulness*. New York: Piatkus.
- Ronald Siegel (2010). *The Mindful Solution*. New York: Guilford.
- Don Siegel (2007). *The Mindful Brain*. New York: Norton.

The Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama is the spiritual head of Buddhism, which can be seen as both a spiritual approach and a basic psychology. It's particularly useful for its psychology and insights built up over thousands of years of meditation and introspective observation.

- Dalai Lama (1995). *The Power of Compassion*. London: Thorsons.
- Dalai Lama (ed. N. Vreeland) (2001). *An Open Heart: Practising compassion in everyday life*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

The importance of affection in our lives

- Sue Gerhardt (2004). *Why Love Matters. How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain*. London: Bruner-Routledge.
- Louis Cozolino (2007). *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Brain*. New York: Norton

Although technical these are written for a non academic audience and are easy reads.

Compassion

Some books that I've found particularly inspiring and beautifully written are:

- Bikshu Sangharakshita (2008). *Living with Kindness: The Buddha's teaching on metta*. London: Windhorse Publications.
- Jeffrey Hopkins (2001). *Cultivating Compassion: A Buddhist perspective*. New York: Doubleday.
- Christopher Germer (2009). *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing your self from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions*. New York: Guilford.

If you want a more about evolutionary approach have a look at:

- Paul Gilbert (2005). *Compassion: Conceptualisations, research and use in psychotherapy*. London: Routledge.
- Paul Gilbert (2009/10). *The Compassionate Mind*. London: Constable Robinson and USA: New Harbinger.
- Paul Gilbert (2010). *Compassion Focused Therapy*. London: Routledge
- Richard J. Davidson and Anne Harrington (eds) (2002). *Visions of Compassion: Western scientists and Tibetan Buddhists examine human nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.

CDs for Meditation

Two useful book/CD combinations:

- Jack Kornfield (2004). *Meditation for Beginners*. New York: Bantam Books.
A nice introduction.
- Dagsay Tulku Rinpoche (2002). *The Practice of Tibetan Meditation: Exercises, visualisations, and mantras for health and well being*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
This book offers a very useful set of postures and exercises, along with a CD of mantras and instructions.

Some useful CDs that will guide you:

- Jeffrey Brantley (2003). *Calming Your Anxious Mind: How mindfulness and compassion can free you from anxiety, fear and panic*. New York: Harbinger
- Pema Chodron (2007). *How to Meditate: A practical guide to making friends with your mind*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.
She offers a very comprehensive programme based on mindfulness.
- Paul Gilbert (2008). *Overcoming Depression: Talks with Your Therapist*
Two 2CDs with a range of exercises, some of which like soothing rhythm breathing and compassionate images we have covered here and you can follow on the CD.
- Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Jon Kabat-Zinn (2007). *The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing yourself from chronic unhappiness*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.
- Jon Kabat-Zinn has also issued his own set of CDs called *Guided Mindfulness Meditation* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2005). You can find more of his work by typing his name into a search engine.

Websites

Compassionate Mind Foundation (www.compassionatemind.co.uk)

In 2007, a number of colleagues and I set up a charity called the Compassionate Mind Foundation. On this website, you'll find various essays and details of other sites that look at different aspects of compassion. You'll also find a lot of material that you can use for meditation on compassion.

Mind & Life Institute (www.mindandlife.org)

The Dalai Lama has formed relationships with Western scientists to develop a more compassionate way of living. More information on this can be found on this website.

Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research (<http://ccare.stanford.edu/>)

Set up by Prof James Doty for International compassion work and advancement

Self-Compassion www.self-compassion.org

Dr Kristin Neff is one of the leading researchers into self-compassion.

There are also many websites you can explore if you go to the website section on the Compassionate Mind Foundation site.

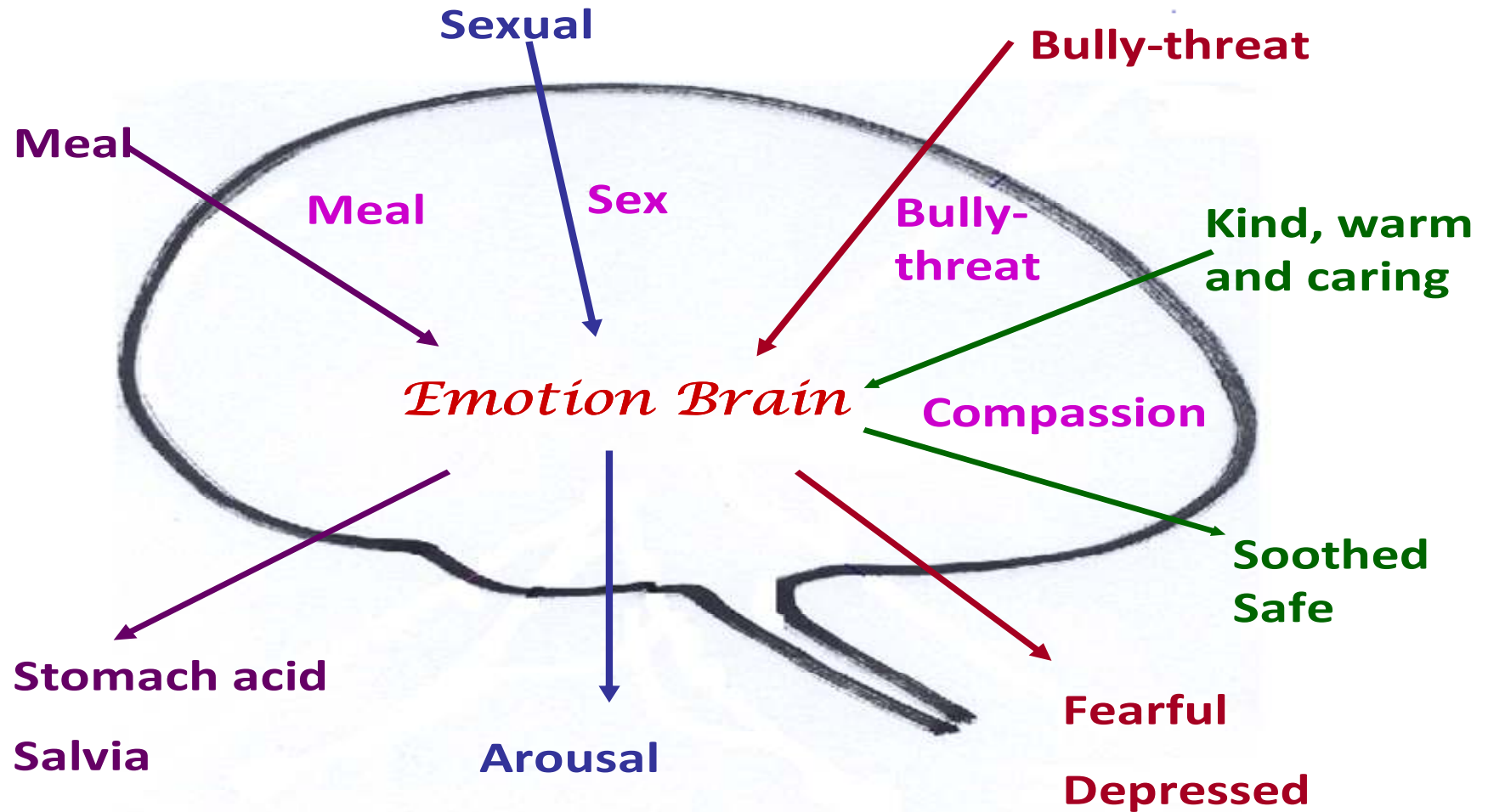
Handouts



Three Types of Emotion Regulator Systems



How our own thoughts and images affect our brains



Pink represents our inner images and thoughts

Internal Threat and Soothing

