

Self-Compassion: The Practice

Hopefully, we have now loosened the conscious and unconscious blocks to the idea of developing a higher level of self-compassion, or in other words, a more functional relationship to ourselves. This chapter will look at a number of techniques to help you integrate self-compassion into your default way of being and enjoy all the benefits. We don't have to be Actively Self-Critical to benefit from the techniques that follow. Anyone can increase their psychological mileage by implementing one or more of them.

As we discussed, we divided the common sources of a structural self-critical orientation into what we named the Moral Source as well as the Pragmatic Source. To specifically speak to the Moral Source we will use a biological justification for Self-Compassion argument as well as our Orange Tree Analogy. After that we will detail 4 specific techniques to develop Self-Compassion. Two of these are unique inventions and two are common evidence based practices. We have chosen these 4 as this allows you to engage with a Self-Compassionate technique in whatever context you are in: time poor and distracted, right through to having more time available and distraction free. Any of these techniques on their own is capable of taking your Self-Compassion to a high level as we have witnessed countless times over many years.

Biological Justification for Self-Compassion

To address this sometimes hidden psychological system it can be useful to develop a purely biological justification for self-compassion to "starve the oxygen" from the conditioned moral white-anting of self-compassion that can lurk beneath the surface.

We could divide the brains emotion systems into three components:

1) Flight or fight system designed to keep us safe. Chemicals such as cortisol and adrenaline are most closely linked to this system.

2) Drive system designed to motivate us towards life preserving and life creating behaviour. Chemicals such as dopamine are most closely linked to this system.

3) Affiliative/Nurturance system is designed to motivate prosocial bonding and care. Chemicals such as Oxytocin are most closely related to this system.

All these systems are designed to integrate with each other. If however, through structural long term self-criticism, the Affiliative/Nurturance system where orientations such as compassion are born, is impaired, damaged or systematically neglected then the Flight or Fight system and the Drive system can become destabilised leading to structural and long term psychological disturbances. Thus, working on self-compassion to restore the Affiliative/Nurturance system to "factory default settings" is a biological imperative if a person wants to operate at full functionality. This rationale attempts to make Moral Sources of self-criticism redundant. Thus, asking if you "deserve" self-compassion through this framework is similar to asking if you "deserve" to have a salad today. It doesn't make much sense to ask this question. If you eat lots of junk food it will tend to lead to certain biological outcomes over time, if you eat lots of salad it will tend to support other biological/health outcomes over time. If you want to be a fully optimised human biologically speaking, certain actions will increase the chances and certain actions will decrease the chances.

Orange Tree Analogy

Another antidote to the Moral Source of self-criticism is an orange tree analogy. Most of us have someone in the family who is constantly self-sacrificing and never taking time for themselves. They're always the first to start on the housework and the last to switch off and relax and the end of the day. They're the one who feels guilty if they're not doing something "productive" or focusing on others. We often see this person trying to shoulder all of the world's burdens themselves, and we often see them getting more and more worn out over the years, getting health problems, feeling stressed, anxious, or depressed. Maybe this person is you.

Sometimes people use all sorts of justifications not to take time for themselves. These can be ideas such as "I haven't earned the right to yet", or "I don't deserve it", or "If I spend an hour on myself, that's an hour I can't spend on my kids and that's selfish", and hundreds of other rationalizations. It's like giving something to themselves is

taking away from somebody else. They feel that if they're a temporary winner, it means somebody else had to be a loser, and they don't want that.

It goes without saying that this pattern of thought and behaviour is not healthy or sustainable. But the motivation behind it is pure and positive, so is there a way adjust it slightly to accommodate both looking after yourself and looking after others, without having to choose or compromise? What if we can set up a new way of thinking where self-care, enjoyment and time out can be had without anybody losing?

Let's look more closely at our orange tree analogy. This is a simple analogy that might help us break free from "if you give to yourself, you have to take away from others." Imagine we are an orange tree and we want to provide big, juicy oranges for everybody in our life: our family, our colleagues, our work, our friends and our community. What happens if we don't look after that orange tree- if it's sitting in the shade, receiving no water, no sunlight, no fertilizer, no pesticides (natural and environmentally-friendly, of course)? Well, as time goes by, the number of oranges the tree produces naturally decreases, as well as the size and quality of the fruit. Thus, providing deep care for this orange tree helps it continue to produce big, juicy oranges for everybody, year after year.

Well, it's the same with you. If you don't look after yourself, take time out to do things that are purely enjoyable and exercise proper self care then you fall into neglect. What happens to the oranges you produce, that help nourish family, friends and colleagues, as well as your future self? They get fewer in number, smaller, poorer quality, and, occasionally, might develop defects that end up harming the people we give them to rather than helping them. If we don't nourish ourselves with rest, relaxation and recreation, our capacity to nourish others will suffer.

So how can you transition from wanting to be everything to everyone to still looking out for your loved ones and others you have responsibilities to, while making time for yourself? A starting point might be identifying untrue things you are telling yourself that hold you back from enjoying life. Thoughts like "I'll relax when all the work is done" are unhelpful because for so many people their work is never truly done- there's always something else you could be doing around the house, or for your job. So stop putting off "me-time"

until everything else is finished because that moment is probably never going to arrive. Besides, relaxation needs to be part of your daily routine, not a tacked-on afterthought.

It's interesting to contemplate that most people take more proactive care of their cars than themselves. They regularly get their car serviced even when no apparent problem has appeared. But when it comes to themselves they only take action once the engine seizes in the middle of a deserted highway.

The best way to tackle the lie that giving to yourself takes from others is to try it and see what happens. Next time you feel you could be spending time with your kids or finishing off the dishes, sit down and watch TV or read a book instead. Notice how your house doesn't immediately fall down when you put your feet up? See how your kids don't instantly come to blows the moment you take your eye off them? By learning to just let things be once in a while you'll naturally learn that you don't always have to be switched on in order for your world to stay together. And more importantly, you'll be able to recharge and refresh yourself so that you have more "oranges" to give when your family, friends, and colleagues really need them.

One final thought to consider when looking at why you feel guilty about relaxing is this: where does your self-worth come from? Do you only feel like you are worth something when you are sacrificing your own needs to help others? Are you constantly striving to support others because you feel empty and useless the rest of the time? Or are you afraid that your family or loved ones will stop needing you? If you define yourself by your accomplishments and your ability to help others then your self esteem and your picture of yourself will always be fragile and easily broken. Your orange tree will have shallow roots and will be at risk of drying up and toppling when difficult seasons arrive. Maybe you would be better off rooting yourself in who you are, not what you do. Learning to accept yourself as you are and having unconditional positive regard for yourself no matter your actions is a vital part of staying healthy. A tree isn't defined by the fruit it produces in a single season, but in its ability to keep on growing and producing fruit through any circumstances, year after year. The stronger and more firmly rooted the tree, the more people will be able to take shelter under its branches.

Formal Self-Compassion Techniques

We will now detail our 4 main Self-Compassion techniques. It should be noted that the **Teacher B** orientation discussed in the last chapter can in and of itself be used as a technique. Watching the internal dialogue on a day to day basis and injecting a "**Teacher B**" voiceover as much as your self-awareness allows can be all that you need to create Self-Compassionate momentum.

1) Check In Technique

Once you are on board with the idea of creating a more functional relationship with yourself (also know as self-compassion,) how do we go about this process? For someone who does not have a history of being self-compassionate or still harbors negative beliefs about it, attempting to make too great a change too quickly can be destabilising. We want our initial techniques to be smoothly implemented. To give you an idea about what it can be like trying to change our internal relationship too quickly consider the following story.

Say our friend Bob moves into a new apartment on the 30th floor. On the first day he gets in the elevator to go to the ground floor. Before the doors close his neighbour John gets in the elevator with him. John introduces himself and it seems like a good start. However, then John says, "do you know what? My girlfriend cheated on me last week". Bob is quite taken aback by this and doesn't quite know what to say. He mutters something about how sorry he is to hear this and he hopes John is ok. There is an uncomfortable silence for a minute. Bob feels like he has to say something so he says "what are you up to today John?". John replies, "I'm going to the doctor". Bob responds, "I hope nothing serious?". John replies "I've got this serious rash on my genitals do you want to see?". Bob is shocked and tells John quickly "no, that's ok, I can imagine".

At this point Bob is looking at the numbers on the elevator and hoping it will reach the ground floor as quickly as possible. He is feeling extremely uncomfortable now, but as the elevator will take a while longer to reach the ground he again tries to fill the silence with another question. He asks "what are you going to do on the weekend John?". John replies "I'm going camping by myself do you want to come?" At this stage Bob is feeling even more off balance and is begging the elevator to move faster. Once the doors open he quickly

mutters "nice to meet you, see you around" as he hastily heads for the exit to the building.

Most people have had similar experiences on both sides. Alcohol is usually involved. "I can't believe he said that" and "I can't believe I said that" are thoughts greeting millions around the world on any given Sunday morning. Regardless it can create uncomfortableness in the future. The point of that story is that if we make too big a shift too quickly in your relationship with yourself and your inner dialogue then you can may feel like Bob at the end of a long elevator ride. We want to make shifts smoothly and efficiently.

How might Bob and John's relationship evolve organically? Maybe at that first meeting in the elevator a few simple exchanges introducing themselves. Over the next few weeks and months some incidental conversations whenever they randomly meet and some polite waves at the letterbox. Perhaps even borrowing the odd tool. A few months down the track perhaps a few polite hours at an invited BBQ. Fast forward three years later. One afternoon Bob finds himself ringing John "I've got a few things going on, are you free later to chat?", John replies "yes, I'll meet you at the usual cafe."

After hanging up the phone Bob realises that he and John are actually quite good friends now and wonders, "Where did that come from? I don't recall making that decision consciously but here we are." It just evolved organically. The point is that we want to evolve that type of relationship with the self. One that smoothly and almost imperceptibly moves towards more emotional safety.

A technique that can be useful in the development of this process is called the "check in". It's a simple technique that usually takes between 10 and 30 seconds to complete, ideally 3 to 4 times a day randomly. Randomly implemented is important so you don't develop the technique as an antidote to feeling off in the moment. We want to apply it across all possible mood states you may be experiencing, good, bad and indifferent.

The start of the technique is a simple question you ask yourself by name "Hey Angus, how are you doing?". We have constructed the technique where all responses will fall into one of three categories. The first category is relevant if

you feel anywhere from "great" to "ok". In that case the response you give yourself will be words to the effect of "Hey great. I'll check in later. Catch you later". The most important part of the response is the statement about checking in later. We are demonstrating that this is an ongoing relationship with the self not a once off. Feeling great to ok is not a "win" in this exercise. It is actually irrelevant. We are seeding the idea of an ongoing unconditional support we will be giving ourselves. Some people stop their reply once they realise they are feeling ok as if being ok means they don't "need any intervention". The process doesn't work without the indication to the self that this is an ongoing support and relationship. Some people initially feel a little awkward "talking to themselves". However, you should remember that you run an internal dialogue almost continuously throughout your entire life. We are just momentarily adding some formal structure to it for a very good purpose.

The second category of possible responses we have created is where you feel somewhere between "ok" and "not so good". It's where you might feel mildly "off" in some way: tired, head-achy, irritable, a little flat etc. So after the question "Hey Angus, how are you doing?" say the response is "A bit off. I have a mild headache." The idea now is that you will do a token gesture of caring. Much like the proverbial chicken soup for someone who is sick. So the token gesture might be "Hey, let's go get a glass of water. Haven't had any water today. I'll come with you. Let's go and get some water." After you have completed this token gesture of caring you also add "I'll check in later." It should be noted that the token gesture of caring doesn't need to be tailored to any issue that arises. We have used glass of water in response to initial awareness of a headache but glass of water could be the gesture for a range of minor things that come up such as "feeling a little stressed right now." It could be also something like taking a ten minute walk or getting something to eat.

The third category is the the most counter intuitive for many people, at least at the start. This is the category where you feel somewhere between "a bit off" and the worst day of your life. It would appear that if we continue the trajectory of the category 1 and 2 responses then we will be increasing our practical intervention here in solving the underlying issue at the heart of the instability we are feeling. The natural response to being in that state is to work out how to try to fix the problem to regain emotional stability. However,

the irony is that to be in a category 3 space often means that the solution is not going to be quick and simple and if your only method of regaining emotional stability is problem solving and problem solving can't do that right in this moment you often find yourself feeling even more vulnerable and unstable. This can continue in a negative feedback loop and create a psychological spiral. Jumping straight into the practical problem solving can be the emotional equivalent of using a fire extinguisher actually filled with petrol.

This usual problem solving response is natural. However, let's look at this approach through a relationship analogy. In this example, a man's wife comes home from work and she has had a terrible day. There are some ongoing issues with her boss and they don't seem to be resolving as quickly as she hoped. She starts talking to her husband about the situation and he jumps in and gives her advice about how to solve this ongoing issue. She gets irritable with him and then he feels hurt saying "I was just trying to help!" An argument ensues and they don't speak for 3 or 4 hours (or perhaps 3 or 4 days). She feels unheard and he feels an injustice was done to him. This type of scenario with the husband and wife role switched just as commonly is not unusual.

What's going on here usually? The wife may just want connection and reassurance in the moment. The husband just wants to take his wife's pain away. She interprets his advice as a form of condescension as if he thinks she is incapable of working out things for herself. He just wants to minimise the negative emotion and move into "solving" the situation as soon as possible.

Let's look at what might be the "least worst" approach the husband might have taken in this situation. By saying words to the effect "whatever you need I'm here" won't solve the problem in and of itself, but it is laying the psychological safety foundation to go through the process of resolving or coming to terms with the issue as smoothly as possible. Because at this point the threat is both internal and external. Not only do we have the feeling of threat regarding the problem, we have the lurking inner tyrant potentially ready to criticise both how we got into the predicament and grading us harshly about how we are going about responding to it. Self compassion has unconditionality at its heart. Failure, success, good, bad or otherwise are irrelevant in this exact moment and are not related to the long term success

or resolution we are aiming for. It's the "I've got your back no matter what happens" sentiment. This is not about ignoring the problem. It is about not making the solving the problem the only way to get emotional stability back. It's about getting emotional stability back first before engaging with the problem. It also doesn't mean that engaging with the problem needs to stop until complete emotional stability is found first. Sometimes this stability can start to come online with minutes and it doesn't need to be complete before continuing to actually address the problem. Even 20% more emotional stability before engaging with the problem is valuable. So, if we ask "Hey Angus, how are you doing?" and we reply "I'm feeling absolutely terrible about XYZ", instead of acting like our metaphorical husband earlier saying "you should do this and that", saying "whatever you need I'm here". Trying to deeply feel what it would feel like to hear that from someone you deeply trusted is key. Having this burgeoning safety can help you create more patience and depth to your problem solving. If you are in emotional turmoil until you solve the problem you will only consider 1 or 2 step possible solutions because you need to solve it now because you feel so emotionally destabilised. It is also extremely difficult to do deep thinking with the flight or fight response raging. We are more likely to be able to see the possible 14 steps required over the next 4 weeks to move us forward in our response to the issue.

None of this is a soft option. There have been experiments going back more than half a century examining toddlers and their relationship with their caregivers. When toddlers with different attachment styles such as secure, anxious, ambivalent and combinations were examined it was found that the toddlers who were most securely emotionally attached explored the furthest in the strange environments. It was as if their comfort zones were expanded further than the other children. The safety they felt became an engine of courage although they weren't pushing back against any anxiety they were just exploring further out more curiously.

How often should you do the check-in? There are no rules, but we have found if you do this 4 or more times a day you may find that is the sweet spot. The exercise itself will usually take less than 30 seconds each time and we have found the exercise to be a superb return on investment for your time.

One problem with implementing such a technique, which is pro-active rather than reactive, is how to remember to remember to do it. Your goal is to undertake this technique randomly, not in response to feeling down, stressed or anxious as an antidote to that. We are exploring creating awareness of our functioning at random times.

A number of ideas may help you in this "remembering to remember".

A) Set a timer on your phone for a random time such as 3 hours and 48 minutes. Once the alarm goes off that is your signal to check-in. You then restart the timer for another 3 hours and 48 minutes. The alternative of setting 4 alarms a day often requires that little bit extra effort that may bring the whole enterprise crashing down. Minimising the barriers to operationalising the system in an ongoing way is a key consideration.

B) A second option is to put a small novel object in your pocket or near your car keys or actually on your key ring. Every time your hand comes into incidental contact with this item, it feels strange which can prompt the memory to do a check-in. A toy soldier or smooth pebble in a pocket or a fuzzy adornment on the keyring have all been used effectively.

C) Tie the check-in to another habit you may have. It could be each time you leave the front door or each time you open the car door. There are up sides and down sides to this approach. The problem that often occurs is to develop the strength of pairing the activity with the check-in activity.

D) Using sticker dots. Coloured sticker dots can be obtained from supermarkets, stationary stores or newsagents. They usually come in small sheets of multiple coloured dots. The idea here is to strategically place dots in places that you will see them periodically. Common traps are putting too many dots around or putting them on objects you will see too often. Both of these will lead you to see the dots and realise you already did a check-in recently and it is too soon to do it again. You will then second guess yourself and over time the dots just become part of the environment and lose their novelty reminder value.

For example, if you were going to put a dot in your car it might appear on the surface that on the steering wheel might be a good place. However, you would be seeing this dot dozens

of times on most car journeys and it would rapidly disappear from your consciousness.

Places that have been used successfully have been bathroom mirrors, clock radios, near the front door handle. There are infinite possibilities. One person we worked with had an interesting solution. He was gifted a solid gold stapler due to some work he had done in an exotic location. This stapler was obviously not very functional and he kept it on his desk as an ornament. During the day he would occasionally pick it up absent mindedly to look at it. He had placed a coloured sticker underneath it so when he looked down to replace the stapler he saw the dot which triggered his memory to check-in.

2) Compassionate Question

The compassionate question fosters the perspective of treating yourself like someone you care about.

The compassionate question is simply:

How can I demonstrate I care about myself today?

We can vary the timeframe to different levels of analysis such as:

How can I demonstrate I care about myself right now?

Or

How can I demonstrate I care about myself this week?

An interesting aspect of this question is that there is no way to lose. If you give yourself a few moments to contemplate an answer one of two things will happen:

1) You will come up with a feasible, practical answer to the question or

2) Nothing will come to mind right now.

Even if nothing comes to mind right now to act on the fact that you have spent a number of moments contemplating the question is the demonstration itself of caring for yourself. You took yourself seriously enough to ask the question.

Whether you come up with an actual idea or not is a secondary issue.

However, there is a common trap here, and that is only looking for actions or activities that have "practical" benefits. Let's look at a common example.

Someone asks themselves "how can I demonstrate I care about myself today" and the answer that comes back might be "join or go to the gym because that is healthy and good for me and will help me live longer etc. So that is a good idea". However, if the person doesn't actually "want" to or "feel" like going to the gym this defeats the purpose. It is almost a tough love solution like **Teacher A** on an average to good day.

With the compassionate question we are not focusing on any practical benefits of the action and activity, we are privileging that part of ourselves that just wants to do something because they want to do it. It is more innocent and childlike. We may have such layers of rust on our psyche that we have forgotten how to do that. When we ask a 5 year old what they want to do right now they are more likely to tap into a visceral desire such as "get an ice-cream" or "build a sandcastle at the beach" or "see a movie" rather than "I want to go upstairs and learn to code because that will help me get a good job when I am older." There is nothing wrong with learning to code or planning ahead but that thinking is for another time and place. It does not serve our purpose right now.

I remember being on holidays watching a group of young children building sand castles on the beach, totally engrossed. Using seashells and other stones they found. Buckets and water. Enjoying every minute. Largely cooperating, sometimes momentarily squabbling over a detail here or there. I saw some of the parents standing nearby talking quite disparagingly about what the kids were up to. Noting what a waste of time it was as the tide would wash away all they would create in an hour or two anyway. I remember thinking that maybe the children had more connection with being alive in that moment than their benevolent, but mildly condescending parents. Let's reawaken that lost part of ourselves in a caring way being both the parent and the child in one.

Of course, it is not that we are completely excluding activities that also have some long term value to us, we are just making that a second order concern. So, if when we ask:

How can I demonstrate I care about myself right now?

And we have three different reasonable possibilities come to mind and we are equally positively predisposed to all three then by all means choose the one out of the three that appears to have the most long term utility or usefulness to you.

Motorcycle Helmet

I once worked with a client who felt the compassionate question didn't "pack enough punch" to make any serious inroads into developing self-compassion. We had gone through the idea and the background but he was just not convinced. We left the session with me thinking I would have to find another way in by our next session.

Now, some background. This client rode a motorcycle. He had this scratched up helmet which he had often commented on. He had said that even though it was scratched up now it was still fully useable and had not lost any of its integrity. He also had mentioned previously that he visited a local motorcycle shop approximately once a week to buy odds and ends and window shop. For the past few years he had mentioned there was this helmet on display that he loved. As he was financially very secure I had asked why he hadn't bought it as it was obviously something he wanted for the last few years. He mentioned that he had been brought up to not waste anything and that his current helmet was "perfectly serviceable" so he couldn't justify buying a new one. These conversations were over 12 months previously.

At our next session, he entered carrying the new helmet. I innocently asked if he thought the compassionate question technique might be impacting. He looked at me perplexed. He said no it was just about time he bought the new helmet and it was a coincidence. We examined the whole issue more closely and it dawned on him that the technique had been at the heart of the purchase decision. The compassionate question allowed him to undertake a compassionate action without any caveats or conditions. Therefore, it lowered the threshold for him to purchase the helmet because that act fitted purely in the realms of doing something that he just wanted to do without running it through a pragmatic cost benefit analysis or moral

judgment about whether it was a waste or deserved purchase. He wondered aloud why he hadn't done it a long time ago but then realized that his previous psychological paradigm blocked the action. He was on the verge of the decision for years and when the "practical" and "sensible" filters were lifted temporarily by the Compassionate Question logic it allowed him to take action congruent with what he wanted all along but couldn't before then give himself permission to do. In that moment, he was treating himself like someone he cared about.

3) Metta

We have talked about a **Teacher B** way of engaging with the world where we get to keep high standards if we wish without the painful downside often associated with the self-critical way of maintaining them. Now, let's talk about another way to create a greater level of emotional safety and what we could describe as a more functional relationship to the self. Notice your reaction to the last sentence and compare it to the reaction to the following sentence; we're going to now work on the art of self-compassion. If you're like many people you have had a different reaction to both of those sentences. However in the context of what we will discuss they're functionally equivalent. It can highlight the effective power of language to either enhance, detract, motivate, or demotivate. The phrase self compassion can be a loaded phrase, and depending on our backgrounds and life circumstances and upbringing, we might have an emotional association to that word that may range from warm and positive to frustrating and irritating. We might feel that self-compassion is a nice idea, just not something we know much about, or know how to enact. Or we might feel that self-compassion is a concept that denotes weakness or the acceptance of some sort of mediocrity.

We all have our own individual fingerprint of associations with all sorts of words and when we are working with our own psychology it's important to realize that we're not coming into the processes with a neutral stance but have preexisting and potentially unconscious reactions to what we might assume or believe the concepts really are.

Let's look at an example of the potential emotional impact of our preexisting relationship to certain words. Here we will use the concept of priming to try to illustrate this point.

To this brief exercise -- it should only take a minute or two -- get into a comfortable position and close your eyes. I'm going to get you to repeat a word for roughly 30 seconds, preferably out loud if you can, and when I tell you what this word is, I want you to feel what repeating this word feels like. When you feel it in the body, what thoughts come up? What memories and associations may or may not start to appear in your consciousness? After you've repeated this word for approximately 30 seconds, I'll get you to repeat a different word and repeat that same process of awareness. The word I want you to repeat to yourself, out loud if possible, is the word "no." Repeat that now for 30 seconds before looking back at this page. Notice your reactions. Now I'm going to get you to repeat another word in the same way and allow you to open your awareness to the impact of this word. This word is "yes." Repeat that now for approximately 30 seconds, again, out load if possible.

Did you notice any difference between these two experiences after repeating "no" and after repeating "yes?" If you noticed any differences between these two experiences, what were those differences in terms of how you felt, what images came up, memories, thoughts etc.? Many people describe after repeating the word "no" for a period of time that they feel a sense of being shut down or closed off and some form of uncomfortableness. This would not be surprising as we probably heard the word "no" tens of thousands of times in our lifetime from being a toddler/baby onwards, "no you can't watch more TV," "no you can't have any more chocolate cake," "no, you can't go to that party," no, etc. etc. Ironically, many people report quite an intensive reaction to the word "no" while not feeling quite as an intense reaction to the word "yes." As we probably have not heard the word "yes" even the tenth the number of times we've heard the word "no" in our life, it may not be surprising that this word is not as intensely primed in our psychology.

For a minute, let's try a thought experiment. Imagine there are two versions of you now, both in alternate universes. In one of these universes, there's a version of you with a little bird on your shoulder that just says the word "no" 24 hours a day into your left ear. In the alternate universe there's a version of yourself with a little bird that repeats the word "yes" into your ear. Imagine we followed these two different versions over the next eighteen months to two years and watch how they engage with the world. It's quite likely

that we would find no difference in their life circumstances after the first two days, weeks or even months. But it's quite likely their paths might diverge at some point these minor decisions might come up where the "no" version of you might just feel a little less motivated to make that phone call, or fill out that form, to look up that information or any other minor activity. Where the "yes" version of you decides that they'll make that call today rather than tomorrow, they will look up that information now, they'll feel that spark of asking that person that question. These tiny shifts on a small percentage of situations over a period of time are likely to create slightly different life circumstances and eventually, potentially more radical differences.

Now returning to our original discussion about emotional safety, a more functional relationship to the self, self-compassion, whichever of those three ideas meets with the least resistance to you mentally. I'll use the term emotional safety arbitrarily for the rest of this discussion. We will now introduce an exercise that draws on the same concepts as priming that we just demonstrated with our yes-no exercise, except we want to apply this principle to the opening up and creation of emotional safety.

We are now going to apply our attentional focus to certain words and phrases that support the development or uncovering of emotional safety as a process. The irony is that the technique that we are going to discuss has its roots in many-thousand-year-old Eastern philosophy, while being more thoroughly researched in recent years in Western psychology. The impact of this exercise in the research literature has been quite extraordinary. We now have evidence of an exercise like the one we will discuss has the ability to reduce the actual size of the Amygdala in the brain, which we could for simplicity's sake describe as the fear centre of the brain (although it is far more complex and important than simply that), in a few months as measured by functional MRI scans. This technique or process is commonly referred to in the research and popular literature as metta meditation.

I used to do some charity work in Thailand and during those years I became interested in the psychological insights of a number of Buddhist monks and other meditation practitioners. This is part of my own curiosity and exploration of the psychological aspects of many of these philosophies and practices. One of the Buddhist monks I got to know well originally came from Eastern Europe. He'd had quite an

interesting and diverse life before he embarked on monastic life and part of this interesting life involved a large degree of partying and drug taking in his younger years. When I had spoken to him, he had been a monk for over fifteen years at that stage. In talking to him, he gave an interesting perspective as someone who had lived a relatively normal life before being exposed to new ideas and philosophies, which he had taken to heart.

This man's practice during the time that I knew him, was a metta meditation or a variation of which I'm about to discuss. I'll never forget his description of what he felt like his experience of doing metta meditation was like. He once related that after 90 minutes of this practice, he felt like he had "just taken two lines of cocaine while having a deep hug with someone he loved." Without promoting drug use, this description fits with many other descriptions I've heard of people describing the impact of the release of the hormone oxytocin, which many people label euphemistically the "hug drug."

A goal in this practice is to cultivate emotional safety, and it's useful to be clear on what we mean by emotional safety. Emotional safety does not mean being free of anxiety, depression, and stress and frustration and anger and other emotions. It is not a tool to directly take those away. We spent a part of our journey reframing these emotions as deeply functional entities. It is, however, a process to make it safe to feel those emotions and view them through the prism of the model we have already discussed, to help us change our beliefs about those emotions, and the need to change our relationship to those emotions. It is not another tool to avoid and distract from emotion that many of us employ to emotionally regulate.

The heart of metta meditation is the applied attentional focus on four phrases that slowly cultivate the process of emotional safety. Let's discuss these four phrases in more detail. There are a number of variations of these four phrases in the literature. However, we will choose one set we have worked with successfully for over a decade.

The first phrase is "**may I be safe.**" Here we are directly priming in the actual idea of safety from an emotional context. We use the precursor "may I" as a form of assertive politeness. Contrast this with the alternative, which may be "I am safe." If I don't feel emotionally safe, and I just

tell myself that I am emotionally safe, this is going to create high levels of dissonance and can be emotionally extremely destabilizing, which is working against the principle of this process. By safety, what we mean is that when it comes to concepts like anxiety we can break that down into two overarching components. Generally we might say that chronic anxiety is made up of firstly, an over-estimation of the probability of something bad happening, as well as an over-estimation of the catastrophic nature of what would happen if the event actually took place. With our first phrase "may I be safe," we're really addressing the first component, which is the tendency to overestimate negative probabilities. For others whose anxieties levels rarely are problematic we're priming in the idea that we are safer than we think we are. We are not trying to be Pollyanna here and to convince ourselves of the idea that nothing will go wrong and that "unpleasant" emotions will not arise, we're simply saying that we are safer than we think we are.

The second phrase is "**may I be happy.**" By happy, we are really using the concept of contentment, such as what we might feel if we looked out the window on a pleasant sunny day and saw the leaves in the tree gently moving in the breeze. Watching that, we feel for those few seconds a potential contentment. We're not trying to prime in an idea of happiness, which is an elusive construct. Happiness is a potential transient state that if we become attached to, we can become frustrated when it is elusive. Contentment, potentially, is a state that can be nourished as a foundational orientation to the world, regardless of what circumstances confront us in any particular minute. Contentment is potentially a sustainable notion, while happiness in how we are discussing it is not.

Let's take a children's movie like Finding Nemo. Here we have the fish swimming happily in the reef 20 metres below the surface. Imagine a piece of cork floating on the surface. If it is stormy the cork gets thrown around, if it is calm and glassy the cork stays relatively still. It's position is largely at the whim of the weather systems impacting the ocean.

However, for our Nemo fish, if the surface has giant waves crashing and thunder and lightning abounding, no matter. It is just smoothly enjoying life in the reef without being affected by the chaos on the surface. If it is a beautiful day on the surface and all is calm, again, no matter, as the

Nemo fish is contentedly swimming in the reef without any awareness of this.

The third phrase is "**may I be healthy.**" By healthy, we mean fulfilling our potential physically, psychologically and emotionally. Here we are promoting an ideal of stability, which can support the notion of emotional safety.

The final phrase is "**may I live with ease.**" We will not take this phrase at face value which might imply that life will always be easy. The concept we are going with here is that bad things can happen, although as our first phrase "may I be safe" is pointing to less so than we fear. "May I be safe" is really saying that unpleasant, painful, and challenging things can confront us, but not only can we cope, but we can thrive in the face of them and get a great exchange rate for our pain.

An example might illustrate. A few years ago I went with my son on a ferry ride on Sydney Harbour. I realised he was approaching an age where hanging out with dad wasn't going to be cool for much longer and I wanted to have some interesting experiences with him before the teenage years landed hard. That Sunday morning we woke early to a beautiful spring day with abundant sunshine. A few hours later we caught the train from our front door to the ferry wharf at Circular Quay looking out at the Sydney Opera House. By the time we arrived the weather had taken a dramatic turn. It was overcast, raining and miserable. We hesitated about whether to turn back or continue. The rainy adventure won out. We took the hour long journey to the terminating wharf and got off and went to lunch. The weather, if anything, deteriorated further. So much, in fact that the return wharf was flooded and unusable. We had to catch a bus to another wharf in a more secure position. Needless to say, we were cold, wet and a little grumpy. The day wasn't turning out as we hoped.

We finally got on our return ferry and were heading back towards the Sydney Harbour Bridge from the West. Shade umbrellas in cafes on the waters edge were lying sideways or in other states of disarray. Looking in the sky there were multitudes of plastic bags acting like hot air balloons dancing in the air. On the ferry a woman peeked her head out the window and the gale force wind ripped her hat off never to be seen again.

Boats on Sydney Harbour were scrambling for safe cover. The wind was blowing at unbelievable force from West to East. I looked through the zoom lens on my camera at people on the boats and saw their miserable faces as they tried to stay dry or find some sort of shelter on their craft. Everyone was being blown to the East by the wind. As I panned through the viewfinder, just observing, something caught my peripheral attention. In the middle of the Harbour something was different. When I looked closely it was a teenage boy sailing in a small sailing boat a few metres long. He was tacking side to side going West, the exact opposite of everyone else who were being propelled to the East. From my vantage point he appeared to be going straight West against the gale force but that was an optical illusion. When I zoomed closer on his face he had a big smile and seemed to be having the time of his life. It had not occurred to me at all that this chaotic storm could allow enjoyment on any level. But here it was right in front of me. There was an excited energy in his movements and I watched in stunned silence as he milked a positive adventure out of what seemed like objective chaos. I can imagine his parents asking him how his day was when he arrived home and him replying "I had a blast." This would have been the exact opposite answer to hundreds of others experiencing the Harbour that day. This teenager wasn't trying to "think positive" or "make lemonade out of lemons". He wasn't trying to put a spin on suffering. He looked genuinely like he was having the time of his life playing with the gale force winds. Not only was he "coping" with the storm but he was thriving and flourishing. That image has stuck with me to this day and I still have the video somewhere of this lone sailing boat forging its own unique path, bending reality to its will.

These are the flavors of the four phrases.

I've had a number of clients come to the realization that they have spent much of their lifetime doing a form of anti-metta meditation by unconsciously repeating phrases such as "I'm not good enough, I will fail, I am vulnerable, I can't cope," and other random sequences. It may have taken many years to create the emotionally unsafe place that they originally found themselves in.

The question that is often asked is "how much should I repeat this sequence of phrases in any one sitting?"

The guidance and research literature, while they're not set in stone, would point towards a time frame that is regularly sustainable, while allowing the process to evolve and develop. Twenty minutes a day is a guideline, but five minutes is better than no minutes.

However, let's go through a story that looks at different possibilities.

Spiny Ant Eater

One time I worked with a very successful but hyper self-critical executive. She was going through some difficult times at work and her self-critical orientation was adding poison to her situation. We went through the metta exercise and she was less than excited about it. Her original perspective was that it was a "touchy feely" exercise and she found it mildly irritating. However, as she was desperate for some sort of stability she felt she had nothing to lose. As time went by we were working on other practical aspects of her experiences while checking in on the metta exercise. She usually gave a non-committal answer such as "yes, I'm still plugging away at it". It became just one of the psychological tools we were working on. As the weeks went by something interesting started occurring, her "predicament" at work seemed to be objectively deteriorating, however, her mood and clarity and functioning were increasing.

One day I questioned her about this and she replied "oh, that metta exercise is a game changer, it's really been clicking". I remarked that the changes I usually observed with that technique were not usually as dramatic and quick, especially for people in the middle of a crisis which hijacked their attention and psychology easily. I asked her if she could tell me more on the basis of trying to unpack any of her specific ways of implementing it that I could use for other people to improve the success of the technique.

She said she didn't really think she was doing anything other than the straight technique we had previously discussed and was at a loss to come up with any explanation. I asked her to retrace her steps from our first discussion about metta until now. She reported that she found the first 10 days hard because she wasn't enthusiastic about the technique and just did the token 10 minutes a day to "tick the box." However, on about the 11th or 12th day she said that she was doing the exercise and when her 10 minute alarm went off she noticed

that she was quite enjoying the exercise and felt strangely calm. As she had no immediate commitments right at that moment she said she thought she would just continue. She ended up doing about 90 minutes before she finished. This, she said, became the norm after that. Here I was assuming she was doing 10 minutes a day at best and she had been doing 90 minutes a day on average all along. Her description mirrored the Buddhist monk described earlier to some degree. This is not to suggest that 90 minutes is what should be aimed for but it opens to the possibility that the more engagement with the exercise the more benefit.

Earlier she had relayed a story about having lunch that day with her mother in which a particularly difficult and threatening work email had arrived. She read the email and showed her mother, who exhibited an almost panicked state on reading the message. The client herself noticed she was strangely calm compared to her mother. Her mother asked when her daughter had actually received the message as she assumed it must have come days earlier and she had just processed it over time to remain calm. Her mother could not believe it when her daughter told her she just received the email right now and asked her how she could maintain such calm. She had no answer to this as she wasn't "trying" to feel calm, she just felt an emotional safety and security despite the email message. She had the clarity to think how she would handle it and calmly planned a course of action while still engaged in the conversation.

She had also noticed in recent hostile work meetings with multiple people at the same time she was unfazed and her previous expected and habitual **T1s** and **E1s** didn't seem to be "activating" as might be expected of the normal person and her past experiences.

I asked her to describe how this all felt to her, to give me some insight into these ongoing experiences. She used an interesting example to illustrate. On television the night before a nature documentary was on one of the channels. It just so happened that I had watched the same documentary. She pointed to the section where the lion was trying to attack a spiny ant eater and it became a long drawn out game of chess. The lion was trying to flip the ant eater onto its back to expose its soft underbelly without getting any spines into its paw. A spine into a paw of a lion usually is a slow death sentence the narrator breathlessly opined. The ant-eater constantly adjusted its position and the lion responded

accordingly. Eventually the lion made a false move and a spine went into its paw. It limped off into the undergrowth with potentially grim prospects awaiting.

My client then said that she felt like the spiny ant eater except without any soft underbelly. Nothing can attack her and she felt protected from all threats. She said it was a bit like being in "god" mode in one of her son's computer games where you cannot get injured in any way and are free to explore unimpeded and without threat.

Metta for Others

Sometimes we may feel resistance to applying the metta process to ourselves for any number of reasons. If this occurs it can be worth changing the focus. Instead of directing the metta phrases inwards, we can substitute ourselves for someone we deeply care about. This could also be a pet, object or icon of deep meaning. Directing this metta process in this direction may create less friction while achieving all the benefits of safety we are looking for. Whether you are the "hugee" or "hugger" you still receive that feeling of safety.

4) Compassionate Image

Our final technique is called the Compassionate image and requires the most planning. It is not something we can do walking along, or in the car. We will need some specific time out in a relatively quite, private location for best effect.

The compassionate image is an evidence based tool that has been successfully studied since early this century. It has a number of components and we will go through them in detail. The audio version of this exercise is available on www.optimalmind.com.au.

The compassionate image is an audio process that guides you through a way to create a safe psychological sanctuary. The first part of this process involves creating an imagined safe environment. This environment can be something from your current or childhood life or it could be fictitious. Some people use alien worlds, one person used a private, hidden, hedged garden that only she had access too. Another looked through Google images until they found a small island in the Seyshells. This island appeared to have a path on the water's edge all the way around in which he could ride his bike. It also had two large houses separated by a clearing and a joint

space. You may create multiple environments so you can choose depending on how you feel on a particular day. The image may change and morph over time. You are increasing your ability to resonate with what "feels" most safe.

The audio exercise gives you suggestions and possible starting points such as forests, snow or beaches but you can certainly choose your own.

The next component of the image is including "safe" people. This is where it can get tricky. We set a high standard for this safety with the safe people we choose for this image. In fact, it is very possible that no living example of such a person exists in your life because our criteria for the image is someone who is infinitely: patient, calm, wise, caring. Nearly all humans fall short of this to some degree. Even an intimate partner who you may be in a deeply contented relationship with may fall short of these ideals. This then leaves using non-descript people who embody these qualities or projections of figures of history, religion, or literature. One person we worked with was able to find a real example to use and that was her grandmother who died when she was 6. Her memories of this grandmother met all our criteria from the young child's perspective and memory. We will mention her complete image shortly.

It is fine to choose one safe person for the image or a "team" of safe people. Some days one type of person or group feels right and another day it is some other combination.

Sometimes people cannot even begin with bringing a human into the image at all. One person was only able to bring in a childhood pet for some time before graduating to experimenting with humans.

The third and final component which is optional is bringing "safe objects" into the image. Safe objects are objects that have particular sentimental value and provide a deep comfort. These can be childhood toys or stuffed animals or heirlooms or other items of deep sentimental value. Some do not possess such items and it is therefore optional whether these are added.

To provide a brief sketch of possibilities we will use two examples related to the above. The person who used the island as their safe place, lived in the house by themselves but all the "safe people" lived in the other house nearby. This gave

a safe psychological space but allowed them to meet their safe people in the clearing between the two houses. The imagery process involved having the safe people provide supportive commentary and presence to this person at first and then as time went on he developed other uses for the image. In time it became so safe for him that he was able to bring his fears, his perceived weaknesses, his "shadow side" into the image and express it. He found that he was not rejected by the safe people in the image but was still deeply accepted. Over time this became a transformational process for his own self-acceptance and he was able to navigate the world with less defense and limitation.

The person whose grandmother was their safe person created an environment that mirrored her grandmother's back garden. However, she upgraded this image with added components. She added two jacaranda trees with a carpet of pink leaves underneath. Between the two trees was a hammock. Here she, her grandmother and her favourite stuffed animal from early childhood would sit and she would bring out all her vulnerabilities and worries to her grandmother. Her grandmother would then provide her deep support and counsel just as her grandmother did all those years ago.

There are few rules when creating the compassionate image. The usual evolution involves initially creating a safe sanctuary then in time, once the image is strong enough, to bring in the deeper, vulnerable parts of the self. This vulnerable self, once expressed, is not rejected, but is deeply held and this allows for integration and the developing of a new relationship with the self that is robust in the face of the chaos of the world.

All the techniques we have discussed can help transform your internal relationship with the self even if you think there is nothing really "wrong" with it now. More emotional safety is an unambiguously useful enterprise and is not making you soft but aids in developing an "engine of courage." The safer you feel the more you can step into the world, play with ambiguity, and make decisions more comfortably at lower levels of certainty.