

# From UCSD Center For Mind-Fulness

## SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

Bring to mind an interaction with someone that makes you feel badly—only *moderately* badly so that you can feel the stress in your body but not get overwhelmed by it. Visualize the situation until it makes you a little uncomfortable.

Now, say to yourself:

- *This is a moment of suffering* (mindfulness)
- *Suffering in a part of life* (common humanity)

Put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands, the gentle pressure of your hands, and notice your chest rhythmically rising and falling beneath your hands.

Now, say to yourself:

- *May I be kind to myself.* (self-kindness)
- *May I accept myself just as I am*

For the last one or two phrases, use whatever words speak to your particular situation, such as:

May I be safe.  
May I forgive myself  
May I be happy and free from suffering  
May I safely endure this pain  
May I find peace in my heart  
May I be strong  
May I protect myself  
May I learn to live with ease and well-being  
May I accept the circumstances of my life  
May we learn to live together in peace

## Self-Compassionate Language

What types of things do you typically judge and criticize yourself for (appearance, career, relationships, parenting, etc.)?

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What language do you use with yourself when you notice a flaw or make mistakes?

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How could you reframe your language to be more kind, supportive, and understanding, to remember that you're only human, and to acknowledge things as they are without blowing them out of proportion?

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As you go about your day, notice when you're using harsh or unkind language with yourself, and then try to reframe your language so that it's more self-compassionate.

## Compassionate Letter to Myself

### *Step One:*

Everybody has something about themselves that they don't like; something that causes them to feel shame, to feel insecure, or not "good enough." It is the human condition to be imperfect, and feelings of failure and inadequacy are part of the experience of living a human life. Try writing about an issue you have that tends to make you feel inadequate or bad about yourself (physical appearance, work or relationship issues...) How does this aspect of yourself make you feel inside - scared, sad, depressed, insecure, angry? What emotions come up for you when you think about this aspect of yourself? This is just between you and the paper, so please try to be as emotionally honest as possible and to avoid repressing any feelings, while at the same time not being overly melodramatic. Try to just feel your emotions exactly as they are - no more, no less - and then write about them.

### *Step Two:*

Now think about an imaginary friend who is unconditionally loving, accepting, kind and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see all your strengths and all your weaknesses, including the aspect of yourself you have just been writing about. Reflect upon what this friend feels towards you, and how you are loved and accepted exactly as you are, with all your very human imperfections. This friend recognizes the limits of human nature, and is kind and forgiving towards you. In his/her great wisdom this friend understands your life history and the millions of things that have happened in your life to create you as you are in this moment. Your particular inadequacy is connected to so many things you didn't necessarily choose: your genes, your family history, life circumstances - things that were outside of your control.

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend - focusing on the perceived inadequacy you tend to judge yourself for. What would this friend say to you about your "flaw" from the perspective of unlimited compassion? How would this friend convey the deep compassion he/she feels for you, especially for the pain you feel when you judge yourself so harshly? What would this friend write in order to remind you that you are only human, that all people have both strengths and weaknesses? And if you think this friend would suggest possible changes you should make, how would these suggestions embody feelings of unconditional understanding and compassion? As you write to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, try to infuse your letter with a strong sense of his/her acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness.

After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you like a cool breeze on a hot day. Love, connection and acceptance are your birthright. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

## Soothing Touch

One easy way to soothe and comfort yourself when you're feeling badly is to give yourself a gentle hug or caress, or simply put your hand on your heart and feel the warmth of your hand. It may feel awkward or embarrassing at first, but your body doesn't know that. It just responds to the physical gesture of warmth and care, just as a baby responds to being cuddled in its mother's arms. Our skin is an incredibly sensitive organ. Research indicates that physical touch releases oxytocin, provides a sense of security, soothes distressing emotions, and calms cardiovascular stress. So why not try it?

If you notice that you're feeling tense, upset, sad or self-critical, try stroking your arm or face, or gently rocking your body. What's important is that you make a clear gesture that conveys feelings of love, care, and tenderness. If other people are around, you can often fold your arms in a non-obvious way, gently squeezing yourself in a comforting manner. You can also simply *imagine* hugging or caressing yourself if you can't make the actual physical gesture.

Try giving stroking your skin or putting your hand over your heart during difficult periods several times a day for a period of at least a week.

### *Hand-on-Heart*

- When you notice you're under stress, take 2-3 deep, satisfying breaths.
- Gently place your hand over your heart, feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, place *both* hands on your chest, noticing the difference between one and two hands.
- Feel the touch of you hand on your chest. If you wish, you could make small circles with your hand on your chest.
- Feel the the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breath in and as you breathe out.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like.

Hopefully you'll start to develop the habit of physically comforting yourself when needed, taking full advantage of this surprisingly simple and straightforward way to be kind to ourselves.

## Here-and-Now Stone

Any sense object brings us into the present moment and out of our sorrows (past) and worries (future) as long as we are aware of our moment-to-moment experience of the object.

- Find a stone that you really enjoy looking at and feeling.
- When you are emotionally upset, find your stone and bring your attention to the *sensation* of touching the stone.
- You can also enjoy the *sight* of the stone, choosing to focus on how it looks at that moment.
- Slowly savor how the stone feels in your hand, turning it around in your fingers.
- Contemplate how ancient it may be, almost as old as the earth itself, in contrast to our soft and tender bodies.
- Know that you can reach for this stone and experience a mini-vacation in the present moment any time you're feeling distress or agitation.

## Mindfulness in Daily Life

Pick one activity a day in which you'll be mindful. It may be while you brush your teeth, while you walk from the parking garage to work, when you eat your breakfast, or whenever your cell phone rings. You might want to choose an activity that occurs early in the day, to help you remember to be mindful before you get overwhelmed with the daily tasks of life. As you're engaging in your mindful activity—let's say you choose the walk from the parking lot to your office—bring your focused awareness to your actual experience in the present moment.

Try not to immediately start thinking of what you need to do once you get to your office. Simply notice how it feels to be walking. How do your feet feel as they touch the ground? Can you notice the change in sensations as each foot rises and falls? How do your legs feel as they move, as the weight shifts from the right to left? What is the air temperature like as you walk? Warm? Cold? Try to bring your awareness to as many aspects of the experience of walking as possible. It's helpful to focus on one distinct sensation at a time, so that you don't become overwhelmed. If you become lost in thoughts or emotions, simply note this and bring your awareness back to the experience of walking.

What you're doing is sharpening your skills of attention, building your mindfulness muscle. This will eventually help you when challenging situations arise, so that you can be aware of difficult emotions without running away with them. We are all capable of being mindful, but in the midst of our hectic lives, we must choose to slow down and notice—if even for just for a moment—what's happening to us right here, right now.

## Pleasure Walk

Would you like to experience the mind of enlightenment for 20 minutes?

Take a 15-30 minute pleasure walk outside.

It's best if you can take the walk in nature but any outdoor walk will do (like walking from your office to the bus stop, and so on). The goal of the walk is to notice as many pleasurable things as possible, slowly, one after another. Use all your senses—sight, smell, sound, touch...maybe even taste.

How many happy, beautiful, or inspiring things can you notice while you're walking? Do you enjoy the fresh air, the warm sun, a beautiful leaf, the shape of a stone, a smiling face, the song of a bird, the feeling of the earth under your feet?

When you find something delightful or pleasant, let yourself go into it. Really enjoy it. Feel a tender leaf or the texture of a stick, if you like. Give yourself over to the experience as if it were the only thing that existed in the world. And when you are ready to discover something new, let it go and wait until you discover something else that is pleasurable and delightful to you.

Be like a honeybee going from one flower full of nectar to another. When you are full with one, go to another.

Take your time and enjoy!

## Soften, Soothe and Allow in Daily Life

You can practice this meditation whenever you feel stress in daily life. Our muscles naturally contract when we're under stress, such as when we experience shortness of breath or muscle tension. By intentionally practicing soften-soothe-allow, we reverse the instinctive tendency of the body to resist and react to emotional discomfort. We also anchor our emotions in the body and transform them there.

- *Soften* into that location in your body. *Let* the muscles be soft without a requirement that they *become* soft, like simply applying heat to sore muscles. You can say, "soft...soft...soft..." quietly to yourself, to enhance the process. Remember that you are not trying to make the sensation go away—you are just being with them with loving awareness. You can also soften at the edges of this area of your body—no need to go right into it.
- Now *soothe* yourself for struggling in this way. Put your hand over your heart and feel your body breathe. Perhaps kind words arise in our mind, such as, "Oh my dear, this is such a painful experience. May I grow in ease and well-being."

If you wish, you can also direct kindness to the *part of your body* that is under stress by placing your hand in that place. It may help to think of your body as if it were the body of a beloved child. You can say kind words to yourself, or just repeat, "soothe...soothe...soothe."

- Finally, *allow* the discomfort to be there. Abandon the wish for the feeling to disappear. Let the discomfort come and go as it pleases, like a guest in your own home. You can repeat, "allow...allow...allow."
- "Soften, soothe, and allow." "Soften, soothe, and allow." You can use these three words like a mantra, reminding yourself to incline with tenderness toward your suffering.



## Savoring Food

- Breathe in and out a few times.
- *Look* at your food. Enjoy the color, texture or shape of your food.
- Gratitude: Reflect for a moment on all the many hands involved in bringing this food to our table.
- Enjoy the *smell* of your food. Notice if you begin to salivate.
- Begin eating. If it's a hand-held snack, how does your food *feel* in your fingers?
- Slowly chew your food, perhaps chewing 5-10 times before swallowing. Notice the feeling of the food in on your tongue, between your teeth, and as it goes down your throat.
- How does it *taste*?
- Now ask yourself: *When I eat this, am I really enjoying it, or am I preoccupied with other thoughts and feelings?*
- Be still. Slow down. Give undivided attention to your eating.
- Stay in your body. How does your food *feel* in your mouth?
- When you are chewing, know that you are chewing. Chew consciously.
- Be 100% in the experience of chewing and tasting.
- Enjoy!

## Restorative Yoga

A good sourcebook is Forbes, B. (2011). *Yoga for emotional balance: Simple practices to help relieve anxiety and depression*. Boston: Shambhala Press.

Know that the only thing you need to do is breathe. All the other movements are extra.

Any movement that occurs with loving intention to what you need in that moment is "restorative yoga." Experiment with the following postures, choosing ones that might be calling you:

### Standing Up:

- Standing on your toes
- Reaching over your head
- Shrugging your shoulders
- Rotating your shoulders
- Arching your back left and right with hand overhead
- Gently twisting your spine, looking over your shoulder
- Dropping forward like a rag doll, exhaling "ahhhhh"

### Lying Down:

- Lying flat on your back
- Stretching your arms over your head
- Pulling your knees toward your chest
- Tipping pelvis forward and back
- Lifting your hips like a table
- Cat/cow
- Dropping knees to your left and right side
- Extending leg and make circles in the air with your feet
- Rest your feet against a wall or on a chair seat
- Child's pose

## Soles of the Feet\*

This is a very effective way to anchor your awareness in body sensation, especially when you're upset and can't calm yourself down.

- Stand up and feel your feet, especially how they feel pressing against the floor.
- Now walk slowly. As you walk, simply notice how your feet feel. When your mind wanders, just feel your feet again. Notice the changes in sensation as you lift your foot, step forward, and place your foot back down on the floor.
- Practice until you feel more relaxed.

\*Adapted from: Singh, N., Wahler, R., Adkins, A., & Myers, R. (2003). Soles of the feet: a mindfulness-based self-control intervention for aggression by an individual with mild mental retardation and mental illness. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 24*, 158-169.

## Forgiveness – Self and Other

We all make mistakes. This is because every thought and action is the product of a universe of invisible causes stretching back through time and outward across the planet. For example, I have inherited my temperament from my parents and grandparents, and my actions are shaped by untold, interacting elements of my environment—climate, people, diet, culture, current events. Therefore, I have limited knowledge and control over precisely what I say and do from one moment to the next.

When we make a mistake, it's natural to feel remorse. Remorse is a useful emotion that alerts us to a mistake. However, when we resist the experience of remorse, perhaps because we're embarrassed, then remorse may turn into guilt, rumination, defensiveness, and reprisal. A healthy response to our own mistakes is *self-forgiveness*. There are 4 steps:

1. Open to the natural pain of remorse.
2. Recognize that it's only human to make mistakes, and try to understand some factors leading to your mistake.
3. Offer forgiveness to yourself, perhaps by saying "*May I forgive myself for what I have done, wittingly or unwittingly, to have caused [this person] harm.*"
4. Resolve not to repeat the same mistake.

Why forgive *others*? Because it's often the best thing we can do for ourselves. Forgiveness is a way of letting go of pain. When we forgive others, we release the pain of anger and bitterness, but we can only forgive others after we have validated our own pain and learned to comfort ourselves. Here are the steps:

1. Open to the pain that another person caused you.
2. Offer yourself compassion for how you have suffered, perhaps by saying: "May I be safe. May I be peaceful. May I be healthy. May I be free from suffering."
3. Try to understand the forces that made this person act badly, or that shaped his or her personality (e.g., financial stress, difficult childhood, low self-esteem, cultural factors)
4. Offer forgiveness to the other person, perhaps by saying: "*May I forgive you for what you have done, wittingly or unwittingly, to have caused me harm.*"
5. Resolve not to be harmed again.

### **Equanimity Phrases**

Everyone is on his or her own life journey.

I am not the cause of this person's suffering, nor it entirely within my power to take it away.

Although this moment is difficult to bear, I will help to the extent that I can.

### **Forgiveness Phrases**

May I forgive you for what you have done, wittingly or unwittingly, that caused me harm.

May I forgive myself for what I (may) have done, wittingly or unwittingly, that caused you harm.

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## Living with Your Vow

When we talk about making a vow, we don't mean making a promise or an unbreakable contract like a marriage vow. Rather, by vow we just mean something you'd like to set your intention toward each day. A vow is like the breath in meditation to which we continuously reorient our attention when we notice our attention has gone astray. This anchors our life in what matters most to us. It makes our daily life like a meditation.

For example, the Dalai Lama's daily vow, from the sage Shantideva, is:

*For as long as space endures,  
And for as long as living beings remain,  
Until then may I, too, abide  
To dispel the misery of the world.*

The self-compassion phrases can also be life vows, such as "May all beings, including myself, be happy and free from suffering."

A vow can be repeated to yourself every morning and night, to reorient yourself to what is truly meaningful and let go of unnecessary preoccupations.

During the next week, try to remember to start and end each day by saying your vow to yourself. For example, after you wake up and before you get out of bed, try putting your hand on your heart and repeat your vow. Sometimes a very good way to make your vow more meaningful is to have some ritual around making the vow, like lighting a candle.

After you go to bed and before you fall asleep, repeat your vow again. Notice any changes in how you feel or conduct your life.