

## Building Self-Compassion

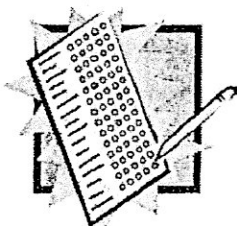
### Negative Beliefs about Self-Compassion

Some of us may cringe at the idea of self-compassion. Being self-compassionate is not something we are taught about or talk about a lot, and so it can carry some negative connotations. Some people think being self-compassionate is too 'touchy feely', and will lead to laziness, self-indulgence or self-pity. Rest assured, self-compassion is none of these things, and we will address these sorts of beliefs that can be a barrier to being more self-compassionate in Module 2.

### Do You Need to Build More Self-Compassion?

Everyone can benefit from a bit more self-compassion. It is not really something you can have too much of. However, this sort of approach was particularly developed for people who are very harsh self-critics, even to the extent of feeling self-loathing or hatred. For these people, developing self-compassion is especially important, and may also take more time and effort.

For some people, being more compassionate towards themselves can be a frightening experience often because of past traumatic experiences. If this is the case for you, and you are struggling to put into practice some of the strategies from the coming modules, then we would recommend being supported by a mental health professional as you work your way through these modules.



To help you make the decision about whether you want to proceed further into these modules, have a go at the following quiz to get a sense of how self-compassionate you are. The more items you tick, the more self-critical you are likely to be, indicating that you could benefit from an 'injection' of self-compassion.

	Tick if this applies to you
I find it hard to be kind to myself	
If something goes wrong I automatically blame myself	
I don't deserve to do nice things for myself	
I am very critical of myself when things aren't going well	
I am very critical of myself even when things are going well	
When I am having a hard time, I wouldn't even think to look after myself like I would a friend	
I focus a lot on my faults and flaws and can't let them go	
If I make a mistake I give myself a really hard time	
When I am struggling, I don't treat myself with much care	
I can't accept mistakes I've made or things I haven't done well	
I think over and over about things I don't like about myself	
I am not very gentle with myself when I am suffering emotionally	
If I make a mistake I feel like I should be punished	
I feel like I'm the only one who struggles or fails at things	

An additional exercise that may be useful in rounding off the challenging of your positive beliefs about self-criticism, is to have a go at the following. What you learn from this exercise you might choose to add into your page 5 worksheet.

In the second column, pretend it was not you but a close and cared for friend who was struggling with the same issue. Now write out what you would say to them, and again note the tone of voice you would use with them.

Me	Friend	Child
I would say...	I would say...	I would say...
Voice Tone:	Voice Tone:	Voice Tone:

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If you found this exercise useful in triggering feelings of compassion within you, then practice bringing this image to mind regularly, so that the image becomes easily accessible and can be used as your compassion 'on' button. You could even carry a photo of this person with you, in your phone or printed in your wallet, as a visual reminder. You could even frame a photo of them and place it somewhere in your daily life where you notice you tend to be your most self-critical (e.g., next to your bathroom mirror if you notice you tend to criticise your appearance a lot).

If you found that the compassionate feelings weren't very strong, or that it was difficult to come up with an image that works for you, it may mean that you need more practice to strengthen this image. If feelings unrelated to compassion popped up (e.g., sadness, guilt, longing, regret, anger, loss, loneliness, etc.), then either you may need to pick a different person to direct your compassion to, or maybe this isn't the most helpful method for you for generating compassionate feelings. Don't worry, the next option might be more useful for you.

### Creating the Ultimate Compassionate Image

Relationships are complicated, and some of us may not have people in our life who we feel pure compassion towards, hence it is hard for us to really benefit from the imagery exercise we have just covered. If this is the case, then the previous image may not be effective in triggering pure untainted compassion, which is really what we are looking for.

Because of this, we often find that this imagery exercise is more useful, as it involves creating your very own ultimate compassionate image from your imagination. This fantasy compassionate image can be whatever you want. There is no right or wrong when it comes to creating your own personalised image that represents pure compassion. In fact, the actual image you develop is irrelevant. It doesn't matter how fanciful or realistic the image is. Remember, we are just using this image to activate feelings of pure compassion within us, so whatever image achieves this aim is okay.



Start by closing your eyes and slowing your breath as you are now very familiar with...

Now, when you think of compassion notice what images, thoughts or feelings arise in you? Don't try too hard, just allow whatever is there to be there, or allow things to come and go as they please...

Now allow an image to arise that represents compassion for you. Take your time to develop an image that symbolises all the things that go with compassion. If nothing comes immediately, that's ok, just take your time and see what emerges no matter how strange it may seem. It doesn't have to be a vivid picture, just a felt sense of the image is ok too. If numerous images come up (a bit like a slide show), that's ok too, we can see which one you settle on as time goes on.

See if you can start to develop an image that holds warm feelings towards you...

Allow an image that conveys a sense of understanding for you, for your struggles and your feelings...

Allow an image that shows kindness, care and concern for your well-being...

Allow an image that is strong and wise as it supports you...

Allow an image that is completely accepting of you just as you are...

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Creating your ultimate compassionate image will typically take a few attempts. Try to treat this as a creative and fun process. Some people will easily stumble on an image that works for them straight away, but then when they repeatedly bring the image to mind, it might evolve and change as more detail is added to enrich the image. Others may struggle to settle on a specific image at the start, and they might try a few different images on for size before settling on one that works for them. It is ok for this to be a work in progress that takes some time to fully develop.

My compassionate image is of a large rock, almost a mini-mountain emerging from a beautiful pool of calm ocean water. My rock is indented at the top with mossy soft grass, the perfect size to curl up in and be supported and comforted, and at the same time standing on the rock looking out gives a sense of strength and security. I know other people who have developed images of a wise tree that has been standing for hundreds of years, with sprawling warm green foliage that provides shelter and protection. Others have created a very wise old woman or man, not someone from real life but a fantasy person, who has experienced all of life and provides unconditional care and support. Others have an animal as their compassionate image, for example a steadfast beautiful stallion that is always on their side. Hopefully from these examples you can see there is no right or wrong, just your imagination and what works for you in triggering feelings of compassion.



### My Compassionate Image

By now you have tried two different compassionate images on for size. It is now time to pick the one that fits best for you and be clear about how you are going to strengthen this image, so that it can be used as an effective and efficient compassion 'on' button when you need it. So first write down which of the two images you want to use as your compassionate image. Is it your fantasy ultimate compassionate image or is it imagining that special person in your life that you have unconditional compassion for. The choice is yours.

My Compassionate Image is \_\_\_\_\_

Now note how you will practice this image. When will you bring it to mind? How often will you do this? For how long will you do this?

For now, try to bring this image to mind regularly, daily, and at times when you aren't struggling. That is, when you aren't in threat mode, but instead when you are relatively calm. Once you have strengthened this image and it is effective in sparking compassionate feelings within you, you will then be in a better position to use it to do the same thing during tough times when we are experiencing emotional pain. Also, regardless of which image you have chosen, always remember to start your imagery practice with a few rounds of slow breathing to get you in the mood for compassion.

I will practice my Compassionate Image (when/how often/how long) \_\_\_\_\_

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Now, notice if the image is of a person or not, something real or imagined, an animal, some other being or an aspect of nature. Is it young or old? Male or female? What colours or light are associated with it? How does this image make you feel? What physical sensations in your body go with these feelings? What facial expression does the image display towards you? What body posture or stature does it convey towards you? How does it sound or communicate with you? What things does it say to you? What tone does it use? What does it do to help or comfort you?

When you feel ready you can let go of the image and open your eyes.

Now have a go at describing your ultimate compassionate image below in words and/or pictures.

My Ultimate Compassionate Image is...(describe in words and/or draw a picture)

Also below note the various experiences that went with this image. How did the image make you feel emotionally and what physical sensations did the image generate within you? What facial expression and body posture/stature did the image convey? What sorts of advice was the image giving? What voice tone did the image use? What comforting actions did the image offer?

**Emotions:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Physical Sensations:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Facial Expression:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Body Posture/Stature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Advice:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Voice Tone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Actions:** \_\_\_\_\_

When people do this exercise, some automatically bring to mind religious figures or a wise grandparent who is no longer with them. Keep in mind that for the compassionate image to be truly compassionate, you need to feel that you could tell it your deepest darkest secrets, thoughts, desires and feelings, and that they would not judge you, they would not turn away from you, but instead would accept you unconditionally. If your image has a judgemental bone in its body or it conjures up feelings other than compassion, then try the imagery exercise again and shop around for a different image.

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Can you see how what we think can be so important in determining how we feel emotionally and physically, and can influence what we do?

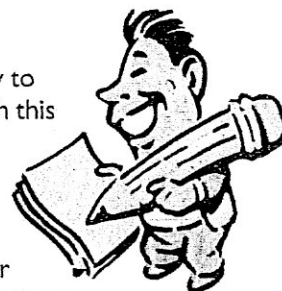
We have already discussed in Module 1 how self-critical thinking about any situation can leave us feeling a variety of uncomfortable emotions like anxiety, sadness, depression, guilt, shame or anger. Thought 2 (*"I am useless at quizzes. I am such an idiot. I don't know anything, I am going to fail for sure"*) is an example of what self-criticism can do to us, showing how it generates difficult emotions, and can lead to unhelpful behaviours and uncomfortable physical sensations too.

As we have said previously, with self-critical thinking, our internal self-talk is highly negative, disparaging and berating. The content of self-critical thoughts can be very cruel, but also the tone of our internal voice when we speak to ourselves is usually very cold, harsh, and attacking.

Now remembering the idea that *how we think largely determines how we feel*, then one way to lift uncomfortable emotions is to change the way we are thinking. This means that you don't just accept your self-critical thoughts as true, but instead use your breathing and compassionate image to shift your mindset into self-compassion gear. Once you are in this more helpful gear, start to question the way you are thinking and see if you can't bring a more compassionate perspective to the situation. Doing this can then have a positive impact on how you are feeling.

### Compassionate Thought Diaries

We would like to introduce you to a *Compassionate Thought Diary* to guide you in developing more self-compassionate ways of thinking. If this way of thinking is new to you, then following a step-by-step guide can be useful. Even if you are familiar with this approach, putting pen to paper can free your mind, making it less cluttered so you are able to think more clearly and compassionately.



On page 6 is an example of how to complete a thought diary, and following that is a blank copy for you to practice on. The diary guides you through how to put your self-critical thoughts out on paper, and how to bring a more compassionate perspective to whatever you are dealing with.

The diary will first ask you to write down information about your **Self-Critical Thinking**. For example:

- What is the trigger? The trigger can be a specific situation you are experiencing, or just thinking about something like a memory of the past or thinking about something in the future, or it could be a current emotion or physical sensation you are experiencing. The trigger is whatever you are struggling with.
- What is the self-critical part of me saying? This is where you list all the unhelpful or negative thoughts that might be running through your mind about the trigger. A number of these are likely to be unkind thoughts directed towards yourself.
- What tone of voice is it using? This acknowledges that it isn't just what we say to ourselves that can be hurtful, but the way we say it. The tone of our internal voice is important to recognise, because it has an effect on how we feel.
- How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts? Rate the strength of your belief between 0 and 100%. That is, how convincing the self-critical thoughts seem to you.



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- What emotion(s) am I feeling? And rate the intensity of the main emotion you are experiencing, between 0 and 100%.
- What physical sensations or behaviours go with these feelings? This recognises that our thoughts don't just affect our emotions, but our physical feelings and what we do too.

This section of the diary will just help you to become more aware of how you are thinking and feeling. At this point nothing changes, we just have more clarity about what is going on for us, and hence are in a better position to meet this struggle with some self-compassion.

The next part of the diary will be about shifting perspective and injecting some **Compassionate Thinking** into the mix. To do this, you must first call upon your *Slow Breathing* and *Compassionate Image*. Once doing this has helped to activate the soothe system and calm the threat system, you will be in a much better frame of mind to bring a compassionate perspective to whatever you are dealing with. There are a number of questions listed in the diary to help you entertain more compassionate thinking. You don't necessarily have to use all the questions, but sometime the more options you have the better. Also, you may find that you answer a number of questions with the same sorts of ideas. This is not a problem, as repetition can be a good thing, especially when we are retraining our mind to think in more compassionate ways.

So with compassionate feelings of warmth, kindness, wisdom, and strength elicited within you, you can then ask yourself the following:

- What does my compassionate image have to say about this? If your compassionate image is your own fantasy creation of an ultimate compassionate being, what would it say to you about the problem you are struggling with? If instead your compassionate image involves imagining giving compassion to another person, then what would this side of yourself that can give such abundant compassion, have to say to you about your current difficulty?
- What advice would I give to a friend I deeply care about who was thinking and feeling this way? We have already seen how compassionate we can be to others. This question can help us draw out our compassionate side that we tend to reserve for others, and bring it to bear on our own difficulties.
- What does the compassionate part of me want to say to the self-critical part? This is about giving voice to the compassionate side of you that may have been sidelined for too long. The compassionate side may recognise that the self-critical part might just be scared and is only trying to help, but is misguided and cruel and only leads to misery.
- What are some other ways of viewing this situation that might be more realistic, kinder or more helpful to me? This question is about tapping into compassionate thinking as being more balanced, reasonable, and wise in the advice it gives. Rather than hot headed and irrational as self-criticism can often be.
- How will I feel about this in 1 week, or 1 month or 1 year? (If it won't matter much then, can I let go of it now?) This question can sometimes bring some new balanced perspective about the true importance of what we are dealing with.
- What can I do to cope and look after myself now? A compassionate response is always geared at taking care of someone who is struggling, so it is important to shift our energy to doing this for ourselves, recognising the ways we can cope and the ways we can look after ourselves when we feel vulnerable as a way of rebuilding our strength.

# Compassionate Thought Diary

## Self-Critical Thinking

What is the trigger? (i.e., a situation, thought - memory of past or thinking about future, emotion, physical sensation)		
What is the self-critical part of me saying?	What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate intensity of main emotion 0-100%)	
What tone of voice is it using?	How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts (0-100%)?	What physical sensations or behaviours go with these feelings?

## Compassionate Thinking

<i>Slow Breathing</i> and bring my <i>Compassionate Image</i> to mind, allowing compassionate feelings to arise, then...
What does my compassionate image have to say about this?
What advice would I give to a friend I deeply care about who was thinking and feeling this way?
What does the compassionate part of me want to say to the self-critical part?
What are some other ways of viewing this situation that might be more realistic, kinder or more helpful to me?
How will I feel about this in 1 week, or 1 month, or 1 year? (If it won't matter much then, can I let go of it now?)
What can I do to cope and look after myself now?

## Compassionate Conclusion

Re-read my compassionate thoughts, making sure I am using a compassionate tone of voice when I do this	
What is a more compassionate and helpful conclusion to replace the self-criticism?	
How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts now (0-100%)	How intense is my initial main emotion now (0-100%)



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### Compassionate Letter Writing

A slightly different method of encouraging compassionate thinking when we are struggling with a problem, is by writing a compassionate letter to ourselves. This is really just a different way of doing the same thing that we did in our compassionate thought diary. That is, shifting our perspective from one that is self-critical to one that is self-compassionate. You may find you prefer compassionate letter writing to using the compassionate thought diary, or vice versa. Everyone is different. It is a good idea to try both on for size and see which one seems to be more effective for you.



To help with writing a compassionate letter to yourself, follow the suggested prompts below to guide you through the process.

The first step is to decide what the problem is that you are struggling with, which will become the focus of the letter. This is essentially the same as the trigger from your thought diary and can therefore be a difficult situation, thinking about a difficult past memory or some worries you have about the future, or a current uncomfortable emotion or physical sensation you might be struggling with. Once you know what the topic of your letter is, the next step is to use your Slow Breathing and Compassionate Image to shift yourself into self-compassion mode. Once this is achieved and you feel compassionate feelings arise within you, then you are ready to write a letter to yourself.

Really try to take the same stance you would if you were writing a deeply caring and kind letter to a friend who was having the same problem. If you notice yourself shift from this self-compassionate stance back into self-critical mode at any point while you are writing, just pause the letter writing, and use your *Slow Breathing and Compassionate Image* again, and then proceed with the letter writing once you feel you can approach it again from a compassionate mindset.

So, if you want to hand write the letter, get out a blank piece of paper, maybe even some beautiful writing paper if you have it. If typing it up on your computer, tablet or phone is more your style, then do that. Either way, use the following prompts to get you started with your writing. Feel free to change the prompts as you see fit, they are only suggestions, and you can write as much or as little as you like for each prompt. Remember you are writing this letter to yourself, and trying to bring a caring and kind perspective to whatever the problem is.

Dear.....[yourself]

I am writing to you because I understand that it is really hard for you at the moment. I know you are struggling with ....[the problem/trigger]

I am sorry you have to go through this.....

I hope you know that it is ok to feel....

I hope you know that everyone experiences.....

Human beings are imperfect and we all struggle, so I hope you know you are not alone in this.....

I am wondering if you have thought about...[add any helpful perspectives about the problem]

I really want your struggle to get easier. To help you feel better, address the problem and move on from it, I am wondering if it would help to.....[add any behaviours that might bring comfort or help solve the problem].

### My Self-Compassion Action Plan

Stepping out of the self-critical cycle and stepping into the self-compassion cycle, will happen relatively easily at times and at other times will be more difficult. With this in mind, it is important to plan for the difficult times, when self-compassion isn't happening naturally for us. Developing a *Self-Compassion Action Plan* that details what to do at those difficult times can be really helpful. It is important to fill in the blanks below, and then place the action plan somewhere that you can access it easily whenever you need it, to remind yourself of what to do to get your self-compassion back up and running during hard times.



**My Triggers** (What are the sorts of things that trigger distress, suffering, pain, or self-criticism for me? These can be specific situations, problems or people, thinking about the past or the future, or experiencing certain emotions or physical sensations that I might struggle with.)

**My Warning Signs** (What are the signs that indicate I am suffering and/or criticising myself and need to be more compassionate towards myself? These could be the typical self-critical phrases I say to myself, particular unpleasant emotions or physical sensations, or how my behaviour changes and becomes unhelpful when I am having difficulties.)

**My Action Plan** (These are the things I need to do when I am struggling):

1. *Slow Breathing*
2. Use my *Compassionate Image* which is \_\_\_\_\_
3. Keep doing steps 1 & 2 until I start to feel a sense of calming
4. Practice brief compassionate thinking by saying something like the following comforting statements to myself (feel free to reword these to something you like more, as long as it is offering general words of comfort/encouragement):
  - *This is really hard and I am sorry this is happening*
  - *What I am feeling is ok, everyone experiences this, I am not alone*
  - *I need some compassion right now, focus on being kind to myself now*
5. Take care of myself by doing one of my *Self-Soothing Activities* such as \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. If I am still struggling practise more compassionate thinking by using a *Compassionate Thought Diary* and/or *Compassionate Letter Writing* to deal with whatever is bothering me.
7. If I am still struggling, ask myself if there is a problem I need to address and use 'Opposite Action' to deal with this. This generally means breaking down the problem into steps and facing it rather than running away from it.
8. If I am still struggling, keep doing my breathing, compassionate image and self-soothing activities to help me get through this tough time.

## Building Self-Compassion

### My Self-Compassion Maintenance Plan

Your *Self-Compassion Action Plan* is really about what to do in times of struggle. In addition to this, it can be helpful to be clear about what you can do in your general day-to-day life when you aren't struggling, that might help you to maintain your ability to be self-compassionate when needed. Developing a *Self-Compassion Maintenance Plan* can help to make sure that self-compassion continues to be a priority in your daily life. Check in with your maintenance plan regularly to make sure you are still on the road to self-compassion and haven't drifted off track.



#### My Maintenance Plan (These are the things I need to do on a regular basis):

1. Regularly practice my **Slow Breathing** and **Compassionate Image** so that I can call on them whenever I need. A good time to do this daily practice is \_\_\_\_\_
2. Find something (an object, picture, song, etc.) that represents my compassionate image, and find a way that it can be regularly incorporated into my daily life as a reminder of being self-compassionate. I can do this by \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Appreciate the positives on a daily basis.
  - My *Pleasure Focusing Tasks* will be \_\_\_\_\_
  - A good time to fill out my *Appreciation Logbook* is \_\_\_\_\_
4. Regularly practice my attention-retraining exercises:
  - *Mundane Task Focusing*. Tasks I will use to practice are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - *Meditation*. A good time to do this practice is \_\_\_\_\_
5. Regularly plan *Self-Soothing Activities* throughout my week like \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Regularly plan ways to *take care of others* and show kindness to people in my life like \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. If any *business needs to be taken care of*, make sure I am continuing to work on it over time, planning each week how I can make some progress on it, like \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_