What is Self-Compassion?

Self-compassion is an important and useful practice for you to develop as a nurse. It is a prerequisite for providing compassionate care and will help you avoid burnout and compassion fatigue.

Self-compassion is a concept that was first taught as part of the Buddhist tradition. Within the last decade, it has been identified as an important construct in self-care and wellness. Self-compassion involves three basic components: self-kindness versus self-judgment; a sense of common humanity versus isolation; and mindfulness versus over-identification. These components combine to create a self-compassionate frame of mind (Neff, 2003 and 2009).

Self-compassion involves opening your heart to yourself. It invites you to be kind, gentle and loving toward yourself. Self-compassion is not narcissistic nor does it inflate your ego. It involves treating yourself with tenderness and understanding. This is in contrast to criticizing or harshly judging. How do you respond when you have fallen short of your expectations or made mistakes? Do you use harsh language and demean yourself? Do you disassociate and eat the rest of the box of chocolates? Or, do you look upon yourself through the eyes of a wise grandmother who understands that imperfection is part of the human experience and loves and accepts you just as you are?

By understanding that the suffering you experience from misfortune or mistakes is universal, you begin to feel more compassionate toward yourself. It is common when you are suffering to feel that you are the “only” one experiencing such difficulty. This creates a sense of isolation and loneliness that further contributes to your suffering. But when you see your experience as part of the larger human experience, you begin to have deep feelings of compassion for yourself and others.

The third component of self-compassion is the ability to hold your painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness. Simply put, this means that you do not get too wrapped up in your feelings. Incorporating mindfulness practices creates the space for you to observe what is happening and not to over-identify with the feelings that you are experiencing. (See Engaging Your Observer on page 43.) Over-identification causes you to cling to subjective feelings that distort reality and prevent you from perceiving situations with clarity. Mindfulness practices and meditation help create balance and serenity, decreasing the drama and chaos that can surround your life.

The Importance of Self-Compassion

There are a variety of reasons that self-compassion is important. One of the primary reasons is that you must be able to treat yourself with compassion before you can be compassionate toward others. Healthy compassion occurs when you have learned to honor your own needs and are able to set boundaries and limits. When you can accept, love, and treat yourself kindly in spite of your shortcomings, then you can treat others that way. Your compassion arises from a place of deep authenticity and you become a potent force of healing for your patients.
Practicing self-compassion also helps prevent burnout and compassion fatigue. When you listen to and honor your own needs you will be less likely to overextend and exhaust yourself. When you learn to care for others, yet not get entangled or over-identify with their suffering, your compassion will be less fatiguing:

*When genuine compassion and wisdom come together, we honor, love, praise and include both ourselves and others. Instead of holding the ideal that we should be able to give endlessly with compassion for all beings “except me,” we find compassion for all beings including ourselves. The separation of self and others melts away. Then, like the sun rising, the strength of generosity and compassion will grow in our practice and we will discover it to be our true nature.* (Kornfield, 1993)

Research shows that self-compassion is linked to greater emotional resilience and psychological well-being. One of the most compelling and consistent findings is that greater self-compassion is linked to less anxiety and depression (Neff, 2003; Neff, Hseih & Dejithirat, 2005; Neff et al., 2007; Neff, Pisitsungkagarn, & Hseih, 2008). In addition, self-compassion is strongly associated with emotional intelligence and wisdom. Self-compassionate people are happier, have better emotional coping skills, and feel more connected to others. Less afraid of failure, they tend to be more intrinsically motivated to learn and grow (Neff, 2009).

Research shows that student nurses experience higher levels of stress than medical, social work, or pharmacy students (Beck et al, 1997). Moreover, another study revealed that one third of student nurses experienced stress severe enough to induce anxiety or depression (Prymachuk, 2004). The increased coping skills, emotional resilience, and the decreased anxiety and depression associated with self-compassion make this practice extremely valuable for student nurses!

**Learning to Love Yourself**

The biggest barrier to self-compassion is the inability to love ourselves. Often times, we have a fundamental belief, either conscious or unconscious, that we are not quite deserving of being loved. Tara Brach, a clinical psychologist and meditation teacher, developed the phrase *the trance of unworthiness* to describe this perception (Brach, 2004).

(Continued on page 44)

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**Engaging your Observer**

Engaging your observer is a helpful process used when confronting difficult situations, thoughts or feelings. Your *observer* or *witness* is simply the wise and non-judgmental aspect of you. The observer can be likened to a wise grandparent that looks sensibly upon the thoughts and reactions of our childlike minds. It gives us the ability to observe life without engaging our past patterns of reacting emotionally.

The *observer* acts as a third party that allows us to separate from personal feelings so that our perceptions arise from a space of clarity and wisdom. Using this technique enhances self-knowledge and self-awareness as it provides constant feedback related to our responses and reactions to situations.

**Engaging Your Observer in a Difficult Situation**

Situation: It is your first day of rotation on the surgical unit and you just realized that you gave your patient the wrong dosage of medication.

- **Center Yourself:** Take a deep breath, bring your attention to the area around your heart and connect with a feeling of love and compassion.
- **Observer relates your internal reactions emotionally, mentally and physically:** “This really makes you feel stupid. You are so upset that you made this mistake. You are concerned about your patient, how your instructor will say, what people will think of you. Your stomach is upset and you feel like crying.”
- **Acknowledge your reactions:** “Yes, I feel stupid when I make mistakes and I am concerned about your patient and my instructor’s response. My stomach hurts and I feel like crying.”
- **Respond from a place of wisdom and compassion:** “Making mistakes is part of being human. Don’t be so hard on yourself — no one is perfect. This is a great opportunity to learn and grow and become a better nurse.”
This trance is characterized by feelings of inadequacy and insufficiency that can be triggered at any moment by a subtle criticism, an argument, a less than perfect evaluation, a poor grade on an exam—you name it, the list is endless.

Identifying what may be blocking you from feeling love and compassion is an important first step. What is it that keeps you in this trance? Some lay blame on the values of our western culture that encourage competition, getting ahead, having the perfect body, having to “prove your worth” to fit in. Others attribute the inability to be self-compassionate to early childhood experiences, trauma, and parental patterns. Research indicates that greater self-compassion is associated with those individuals who experienced compassionate parenting. And conversely, that decreased self-compassion was associated with parents who were critical and judgmental (Neff & McGeehee 2010).

Regardless of what may have caused your unworthiness trance, it is important to understand how very precious and sacred you are. Awakening to your true nature and understanding—as Florence Nightingale said, you are a reflection of the Divine—helps to dispel this trance and allow self-compassion into your life. But remember, learning to be compassionate toward yourself is a life-long process. It is a process that you engage in every moment as you open your heart in the face of life’s difficulties and embrace an attitude of kindness toward yourself. One of the practices that you may find helpful is the Loving-Kindness Meditation. (See Loving-Kindness Meditation on page 45.)

Taking time to reflect on the various aspects of your life will help you identify areas needing love and nurturance. (See Questions for Self-Exploration and Awareness on the left.) While addressing each of these questions, again remember that this is a life-long process of deep inner inquiry and growth. Focus on one area at a time and note when you respond with a powerful NO. These are areas that need special attention.

Be patient, kind, and treat yourself with the utmost respect. You will find that when you are self-compassionate in one area of your life, the positive effects will spill into all other areas of your life. The challenge is to set aside your old beliefs, awaken from your trance, and love and accept yourself just as you are!
Loving-Kindness Meditation

This meditation is a practice that uses repeated phrases, images and feelings to create loving-kindness and compassion toward oneself and others. You can begin by repeating the phrase for ten to twenty minutes each day. There are many variations of the verses. Feel free to modify the meditation in any way that resonates more deeply with you. The verse below is one taught by meditation teacher, Jack Kornfield.

1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position. Scan your entire body for any areas that might be carrying tension and gently stretch and move your body in ways that release that tension.

2. Set aside any concerns or worries - you can pick them up at the end of the meditation.

3. Bring to mind the memory of a person, place or thing that evokes a loving feeling within you. It may be holding a newborn baby, hugging a loved one, cuddling your pet, or being caressed by the sun on a sandy beach.

4. Let your consciousness rest in that feeling of love and with each inhalation imagine that you are infusing your body with love-laden light. With each exhalation, imagine that you are ridding yourself of any negative thoughts or feelings. Continue this process for several breaths or until you feel relaxed.

5. Inwardly recite the following verses to yourself. Pause and experience the “feeling” of each sentence before proceeding to the next. 
   May I be filled with loving-kindness.
   May I be well.
   May I be peaceful and at ease.
   May I be happy.

Repeat the phrases over and over allowing the feelings to permeate your body, mind and emotional being. Observe and acknowledge any thoughts that are distracting or irritating and simply return to repeating the verse. Continue this practice for several weeks and when you feel ready you can expand the focus of your loving-kindness to include others.

References


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