Creating Light in the “Dark Winter”

Compassion Fatigue and Self-compassion

Interrupt the Cycle of Fatigue with Self-Compassion

At this point in our 2020 journey, we all have experienced times when we felt out of steam. As the “new normal” is constantly changing, many of us have experienced compassion fatigue. Do these stages sound familiar? Remember the “can-do” energy you gave to stocking up and going the extra mile to keep yourself and others safe? Some of us chose peaceful protesting to call for social change.

This is the Zealot stage. Along the way, however, the imperfections around us became clear. We found ourselves moving from the energy of the zealot to the irritability stage. How many times would the information change? How many police shootings will it take before solutions are enacted? At nine months in and counting, political conflict continues and our COVID cases peak. Our care providers become cynical when the reality of the pandemic is questioned. We feel a sense of frustration and cynicism. Our hopefulness wanes. The more we learn, the more complicated this all seems. This can be overwhelming and lead us to the natural reaction of Withdrawal. We see the intricate connections between our health, social, economic, and political challenges. We sleep more, engage less, and find accessing energy for the tasks of caring for others and ourselves increasingly difficult. We struggle to empathize even as the news bombards us with stories of pain and grief. Some of us move onto the Zombie stage where we shed connections to avoid facing the imperfections and complexities. We trust our ability to “go it alone” with a new level of frenetic energy that can lead to sleeplessness, physical and mental strain, and isolation.

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When we find ourselves in these stages, we realize we are not the person we want to be. We have been acting as if this is a sprint instead of a marathon. We have not preserved our balance amid fear. AND this is the normal human response to overwhelming and complex challenges.

As we head into the winter season of this pandemic and wait out the transition of our government, how can understanding these stages offer to prevent feelings of despair and isolation?

Creating light: The strategy focus for this blog is self-compassion. Science has shown that self-compassion makes us less anxious, depressed, and self-critical—and more productive, supportive of others, and physically healthier. If not being able to deal with imperfections and gradually isolating from others are the hallmarks of compassion fatigue, an anecdote exists in self-compassion.

As you reflected on your experiences of compassion fatigue over the past months, what were you thinking and feeling about yourself?

1. Was there more self-criticism than self-kindness?
2. Did you feel singled out for ways that you might have fallen short or were you aware that you, like all of us, are doing your best and making some mistakes along the way?
3. Are you able to name your feelings to grow your self-awareness without getting pulled into a swirl of negative self-talk?

These three questions help define self-compassion and can become strategies to practice in the weeks ahead as we do our best to connect with friends and family over the holidays and in the isolating winter months. When you notice that you are experiencing an uncomfortable feeling such as disappointment, anger, or frustration, practice saying three things to yourself (things you would say to a friend):

1. “I am sorry you are feeling this way, I know it is tough.”
2. “Others experience this painful feeling too and many would understand you.”
3. “You have taken the first step to dealing with the feeling by naming it. Good for you! Do you want to let it go or take another action?”

A quick example from our team: “I noticed that I was dreading Thanksgiving. It is my favorite holiday because the gifts we give are the gifts of presence and shared food. It will be neither this year for me. I knew I should be creating some sort of alternative plan but felt deeply sad and yet was down on myself because many have it so much worse right now. Then I practiced self-compassion. I told myself that this is a hard time for me and gave myself a hug. I thought about all the people right now who were feeling like I was, regardless of who has it worse. Without kicking myself any further, I began to think about a way to give to others over the Thanksgiving weekend that would honor my need in this very imperfect time for all of us.”

Learn more ways to “Create Light in the Dark Winter” with our other new blogs: Boundaries; Compassionate Action Steps; Expectations and Structure; Mindfulness; and Stress Resilience.