

Wellness and Resilience Strategies: Heart

Section 11



INTRODUCTION

In the compass model the four sectors, Mind, Spirit, Strength and Heart, not only contribute to your overall wellness, but also provide guidance on strategies to help build your compassion resilience. Heart is one of the sectors. This section will take a deeper look at our emotions and our relationships—both with ourselves and with others. We will be invited to focus on our self-compassion as we seek to be compassionate in our relationships with clients, their families and our colleagues.



INFORMATION

“A deep sense of love and belonging is an irresistible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don’t function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick” — Brené Brown

Humans were made for connections and relationships to others. Research has shown the positive outcomes for our overall health when we feel such connections,¹ and as we saw in Section 7, “Positive Staff Culture,” relationships and how we interact with others are important to a healthy workplace environment. Good communication skills contribute to developing healthy relationships at work. Among the key skills necessary for good communication are listening well, being aware of body language, and showing empathy and respect.²

Strong emotional health supports strong relationships and is very important to our overall wellbeing. Being able to stay calm even in the midst of stressful circumstances allows us to be thoughtfully responsive rather than impulsively reactive. We seek to have our emotions serve our well-being rather than have them control us. When we practice mindfulness, we are better able to regulate our emotions and to recognize when we may need an emotional “tune-up.” In other words, mindfulness helps us recognize when we may be falling prey to compassion fatigue.

The importance of relationships and emotional regulation is not only valuable to our connection to those around us, but to ourselves as well. A healthy relationship with oneself is demonstrated by being self-compassionate.³ Dr. Kristin Neff, a researcher in the field of self-compassion, identified **three elements of self-compassion**: 1) being kind to yourself vs. judging yourself, 2) recognizing your common humanity vs. isolating yourself, and 3) being mindful about our emotions vs. over identifying with them. [Learn more about Dr. Neff’s research.](#)

¹ Seppala, E. (2012). [Connect to thrive.](#)

² Doyle, A. (2018). [Communication skills for workplace success.](#)

³ Neff, K. (n.d.). [Embracing our common humanity with self-compassion.](#)

* The compass model is adapted from the work of [The Samaritan Family Wellness Foundation.](#)

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Fortunately, we can learn skills to increase our self-compassion. Consider these words from a parent and physician on her use of mindful self-compassion to allow her to show empathy and compassion to her child in tough situations:

I am the mother of a 24-year old daughter who is completely blind and lives with autism. Frankly, her autism throws a wrench, okay sometimes a crowbar, into her behavior. It's tough. She gets stuck on things that happen to her that most "neurotypical" people would brush off. A cup of water spills, an outing with a friend is cancelled, a flight time changes — these all result in anger, catastrophizing, and a ruined day. A night's sleep will usually reset her mood, usually. It's tough on her, but it's also tough on me. Yes, I now actually take my feelings into account during my daughter's rough spots. Mindful self-compassion is a new tool in my parental toolbox, and it has helped me to shift my perspective, from a 90% focus on my daughter's needs to split my focus 50/50 between hers and mine.

**Kristin Neff describes the 3 components of Mindful Self-Compassion. First, notice and accept how we feel, react, etc. to a given situation in a non-judgmental way. Recognize that we are in emotional pain, that there is some degree of suffering (Mindfulness). Next, remember that suffering is part of life for humans, that we all suffer (Common Humanity). Finally, ask ourselves, how can I be kind to myself in this moment, what do I need? (Self-Kindness)*

For me, taking a Self-Compassion Break decreases my parental anxiety, guilt, and shame (the emotions behind my anger), which significantly reduces my daughter's anger. I help myself first, which helps my daughter. The proverbial "put your own oxygen mask on first." And this is a very portable tool. Deploy it right in the middle of a tantrum!

Here's an example: My daughter was looking forward to going out with her friend for lunch. Thirty minutes before the appointed time, her friend called to say she had been in a car accident, is ok, but has to cancel the outing. My daughter's reaction? Devastation! Anger! Tears! Slamming doors! "I have such bad luck, now I'm having more bad luck! Why do I always have such bad luck?" She's holed up in her room, and eventually I have to go in there with some empathy. And I'm not feeling so empathetic at the moment. I am frustrated, and feel badly for my daughter. I am angry that she is thinking only of herself, not that her friend was in an accident. Some guilt and shame and self-judgement roll in: "Why am I not a better parent? More empathetic? Why didn't I go comfort my daughter right away, instead of waiting 30 minutes?"

I gingerly knock on her door and go in. I remember my Mindful Self-Compassion tools. First, recognition of my emotional pain- I say to myself, "This hurts, Ouch! I feel bad, this is a moment of suffering." Just acknowledging this fact gives me a bit of separation from what's going on. It keeps me from getting carried away with my emotions. I can step back a bit from the situation and help myself. Next, I remind myself "All parents feel this way at times." Then I ask myself "What do I need right now? How can I be kind to myself?" And I'm thinking all these thoughts in rapid succession, while I've got my daughter in a bear hug. I decide that what I need right now is some loving-kindness. Directed at me. So I start to focus and breathe. Breathing in I say to myself "Love for me" breathing out "Love for her," and so on. I'm giving myself what I need, and after about 8 cycles of breathing like this, things get better for me. My anxiety level goes down, I'm no longer angry, and my empathy has returned for real. Other things I might have needed in that moment? A soothing touch, speaking to myself in a warm tone- "You're not a bad parent, this is a tough emotional situation, and you are doing your best." Or a cup of chamomile tea. My daughter is still stuck for the day, but I'm not stuck with her. I can just love her and move on.

Mindful Self-Compassion and the Self-Compassion Break. Try it for yourself!



Compassionate Connections to Parents