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Compassion

Life can be challenging and rarely will we go through a week unscathed. Sometimes the damage is superficial, merely a scratch on our skin; occasionally, if a bone is broken or an ankle twisted, the physical damage can be debilitating, but there are times when the damage goes unseen. How is your mental health? How are you feeling about yourself?

Mindful self-compassion aims to create a balanced approach to the negative thoughts and emotions that often populate our minds. It encourages connection and acceptance rather than simply banishing these thoughts from our minds. Critical judgement is replaced with mindful balance so that our feelings to others and, crucially, ourselves are neither hidden nor exaggerated.

Like many of the strategies that are advocated for mental health, they can sometimes seem somewhat 'fluffy' and theoretical, but if one looks at the topic with some depth we start to see its benefits and will create an understanding of just how we can do it!

Kristin Neff's *Self Compassion Scale* is a validated assessment for how compassionate a person is feeling about themselves and directly correlates to feelings of happiness, self-efficacy; whilst the opposite is the case for depression, anxiety and stress (Albertson et al., 2014). This assessment is often used to see how effective an intervention has been and, when placed alongside other metrics, the evidence for the fluffy becomes a little bit more solid. In 2018 Eriksson et al., the links between self-compassion and the symptoms of burnout and found that a simple training programme, delivered over a six-week period, improved the former and diminished the latter.

The foundations of self-compassion can be broken down into three pillars and these are the components you will need to work on.

1. Be Mindful – Maybe it is because our eyes see out of our body, that we are so much better at looking at other people than we are at understanding ourselves. In fact, unless we look in a mirror, vision is not particularly relevant when it comes to understanding how we are doing. We need to become more aware of how our bodies and brains are feeling. The more mindful and aware we become of tension in muscles, our breathing, our heart rate and our thoughts, the more adaptive we can be in implementing the second and third skills.
2. Self-kindness – The key here is acceptance that sometimes we do not get things right and we need to acknowledge that it is natural to make mistakes. This can be particularly hard for the perfectionist. They can score 9 out of 10 in a test yet, rather than celebrating an excellent result, they will catastrophise over the absent 10%. This person needs to create mechanisms of support rather than fester over what is a minor blip. Instead of defaulting to the judgmental mind, they need to unlock personal gratitude.

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3. Connection – Having a network of people who you can talk to when times are tough can help you see with greater clarity. They remind us that we are not alone, that there are others who will be challenged too, and they help us to dilute some of the turmoil that rankles in our brains. Another way in which the word connection is relevant relates to the relationship we have to what is important to you. If we can live a life with actions that are closely aligned to these factors, you are likely to experience a good quality of life – the challenge for many is to identify these factors, write them down and create a definition of mission.

Over the past month there has been much talk centred around the phrase *'It is okay to not be okay'*. Just remember that it is okay to look after yourself too!