

Compassionate Letter Writing

Keep in mind that all the exercises and work that we are doing is to develop a compassionate mind – and that the pattern within ourselves will help us find the courage to face up to the difficult things and/or self acceptance and self peacefulness. Everything is orientated for that - the way we think, our behaviours and our intentions. We are training our minds.

Learning to think and reason compassionately can sometimes be helped along by writing letters to ourselves. In this exercise we are going to write about difficulties, but from the perspective of the compassionate part of ourselves. There are different ways you can write this letter. One way is to take your pen and paper and then spend some moments engaged with your soothing breathing rhythm. Next move into your compassionate self; remembering you at your best - at your calmest, at your wisest – at your most caring. Imagine yourself as you would *ideally* like to be in terms of being mature and powerfully compassionate. Now try to feel your compassionate self. As you focus on it, feel yourself expanding slightly and feeling stronger. Imagine you are a compassionate person who is wise, kind, warm and understanding. Consider your general manner, tone of voice, and the feelings that come with your ‘caring compassionate self.’ Adopt a kind facial expression. Try to feel the kindness in your face before moving on. Think about the qualities you would like your compassionate self to have. Spend time feeling and gently exploring what those qualities are like when you focus on them. Remember, it does not matter if you actually feel you are like this, but focus on the *ideal* you would like to be. It is your intentions that are important – feelings may follow with practice. Spend at least one minute, longer if possible, thinking about those parts of yourself. Don’t worry if this is difficult, just do the best you can – have a go.

When we are in a compassionate frame of mind (even just slightly), or in a pattern of trying to help a friend or someone we care for, we try to use our personal experiences of life wisely. We know that life can be hard; we offer our strength and support; we try to be warm and not judgemental or condemning. Now, just take a few breaths and try to sense and feel that wise, understanding, compassionate part of you arise in you. This is the part of you that will write the letter. So we try to write this kind of letter from a compassionate point of view. If thoughts of ‘am I doing it right?’ or ‘I can’t get much feeling here’ arise, just note or observe these thoughts as normal comments our minds like to make, but re-focus your attention and simply observe what happens as you write, as best you can. There is no right or wrong, only the effort of trying – it is the practice that helps. As you write, try to create as much emotional warmth and understanding as you can. You are practising writing these letters from your compassionate side.

As you write your letter, try to allow yourself to *understand and accept* your distress. For example, your letter might start with:

‘I am sad. I feel distressed; my distress is understandable because.....’

Note the reasons. Realising your distress makes sense. Then, perhaps you could continue with:

‘I would like me to know that.....’



For example, your letter might point out that as we become stressed or depressed, our depression or a distressed state can come with a powerful set of thoughts and feelings – so how you see things right now may be the depression view on things. Given this, we can try and step to the side of the distress and write and focus on how best to cope. So we can write:

‘It might be helpful to consider...’

A second way of doing this is to imagine your compassionate image writing to you, imagining a dialogue with them, and what they will say to you. So, for example, my compassionate image might say something like:

‘Hi Paul,

Gosh, the last few days have been tough. Isn't it typical of life that problems arrive in groups rather than individually. It's understandable why you're feeling a bit down because . . . Hang in there because you are good at seeing these as the ups and downs of life. There have been times before when things have seemed dark but they pass and you have shown a lot of courage in dealing with this very tricky brain that is so tough at times. So you have developed abilities for getting through this and tolerating the painful things.’

You will note that the letter points to *my* strengths and *my* abilities. It doesn't issue instructions such as: ‘*You must* see these things as the ups and downs of life’. This is important in compassionate writing. You don't want your compassionate letters to seem as if they are written by some smart bod who is giving you lots of advice. There has to be a real appreciation for your suffering, a real appreciation for your struggle and a real appreciation for your efforts at getting through. The compassion is a kind arm round your shoulders, as well as re-focusing your attention on what is helpful for you.

An example

Here is a letter from someone we'll call Sally, about lying in bed feeling depressed. Before looking at this letter, let's note an important point. In this letter we are going to refer to ‘*you*’ rather than ‘*I*’. Some people like to write their letters like that, as if writing to someone else. See what works for you, but over time try to use ‘*I*’. So, you could read this letter and substitute ‘*I*’ for ‘*you*’.

‘Good morning Sally,

Last few days have been tough for you so no wonder you want to hide away in bed. Sometimes we just get to the point of shutdown, don't we, and the thought of taking on things is overwhelming. You know you have been trying real hard but have felt exhausted through no fault of your own. I mean you haven't put your feet up with a gin and tonic and the daily paper. I guess the thing now is to work out what helps you. You've shown a lot of courage in the past in pushing yourself to do things that you find difficult. Lie in bed if you think that it can help you, of course, but watch out for critical Sally who could be critical about this. Also you often feel better if you get up, tough as it is. What about a cup of tea? You often like that first cup of tea. Okay, so let's get up, move around a bit and get going and then see how we feel. Tough, but let's try . . .’



So you see the point here: it's about understanding, being helpful, having a really caring focus, but at the same time working on what we need to do to help ourselves. Now you might write this one in your head – imagine a really kind and understanding part talking with you. At other times it is useful to actually use a pen and paper and write to yourself.

Guides to letter writing

When you have written your first few compassionate letters, go through them with an open mind and think whether they actually capture compassion for you. If they do, then see if you can spot the following qualities in your letter.

- It expresses concern and genuine caring.
- It is sensitive to your distress and needs.
- It is sympathetic and responds emotionally to your distress.
- It helps you to face your feelings and become more tolerant of them.
- It helps you become more understanding and reflective of your feelings, difficulties and dilemmas.
- It is non-judgemental/non-condemning.
- A genuine sense of warmth, understanding and caring permeates the whole letter.
- It helps you think about the behaviour you may need to adopt in order to get better.

Self-critical people can struggle with this to begin with, and are not very good at writing compassionate letters. Their letters tend to be rather full of finger-wagging advice. So we have to work at this and practise. The point of these letters is *not* just to focus on difficult feelings but to help you reflect on your feelings and thoughts, be open with them, and develop a compassionate and balanced way of working with them. The letters should not offer advice or tell you what you should or shouldn't do. It is not the advice you need, but the support to act on it.

Therapist Note: The letter will contain all of the helpful attention, thinking, behaviour and feeling that were noted above. This requires the person to really focus on trying to be helpful and kind to themselves. You will find, however, that to begin with self-critical people write quite cold letters. They will often have words in like 'you don't need to feel down because...' or 'you should...'. These are invalidations and more authoritarian suggestions than compassionate ones.

However they will change over time. Some people really enjoy learning to write letters to themselves, but it takes practice.

