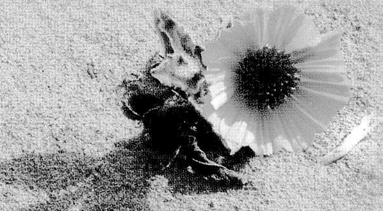
"A TRANSFORMATIVE READ." —BRENÉ BROWN

THE PROVEN POWER OF BEING KIND TO YOURSELF

Self-Compassion



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Chapter Six

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

You know quite well, deep within you, that there is only a single magic, a single power, a single salvation . . . and that is called loving. Well, then, love your suffering. Do not resist it, do not flee from it. It is your aversion that hurts, nothing else.

—Herman Hesse, *Wer lieben kann ist glücklich. Über die Liebe.*

Self-compassion is an incredibly powerful tool for dealing with difficult emotions. It can free us from the destructive cycle of emotional reactivity that so often rules our lives. This chapter looks more closely at the ways that self-compassion provides emotional resilience and enhances well-being. By changing the way we relate to ourselves and our lives, we can find the emotional stability needed to be truly happy.

Self-Compassion and Negative Emotions

One of the most robust and consistent findings in the research literature is that people who are more self-compassionate tend be less anxious and depressed. The relationship is a strong one, with self-compassion explaining one-third to one-half of the variation found in how anxious or depressed people are. This means that self-compassion is a major protective factor for anxiety and depression. As discussed earlier, self-criticism and feelings of inadequacy are implicated in the experience of depression and anxiety. When we feel fatally flawed, incapable of handling the challenges life throws our way, we tend to shut down emotionally in response to fear and shame. All we see is doom and gloom, and things go down from there, as our negative mind-set colors all our experiences. I like to call this mental state "black goo" mind.

Though sticky and unpleasant, this process is actually quite natural. Research has demonstrated that our brains have a negativity bias, meaning we're more sensitive to negative than to positive information. When evaluating others or ourselves, for instance, negative facts are given more weight than positive ones. Think about it. If you glance in a mirror before heading out for a party and see that you have a pimple on your chin, you're not going to notice the fact that your hair looks great or that your outfit is fabulous. All you'll see is that pimple, flashing at you like the red emergency light on top of an ambulance. Your sense of how you look for your big evening out will be skewed accordingly. There's a reason for this.

In the natural environment, negative information usually signals a threat. If we don't notice that crocodile lurking in the banks of the river immediately, we'll soon become his lunch. Our brains evolved to be highly sensitive to negative information so that the fight-or-flight response could be triggered quickly and easily in the brain's amygdala, meaning that our chances of taking action to ensure our survival would

be maximized. Positive information isn't as crucial to immediate survival as it is to long-term survival. Noticing that the river has fresh, clean water is important, especially if you're thirsty or deciding on a place to camp, but there's not the same urgency to act on these data. Thus, our brains give less time and attention to positive than to negative information. As Rick Hanson, author of *The Buddha's Brain*, says, "our brain is like Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones." We tend to take the positive for granted while focusing on the negative as if our life depended on it.

Once our minds latch on to negative thoughts, they tend to repeat over and over again like a broken record player. This process is called "rumination" (the same word that's used for a cow chewing the cud) and involves a recurrent, intrusive, and uncontrollable style of thinking that can cause both depression and anxiety. Rumination about negative events in the past leads to depression, while rumination about potentially negative events in the future leads to anxiety. This is why depression and anxiety so often go hand in hand; they both stem from the underlying tendency to ruminate.

Research indicates that women are much more likely to ruminate than men, which helps explain why women suffer from depression and anxiety about twice as often as men. Although some of these gender differences may be physiological in origin, culture also plays a role. Because women have historically had less power in society than men, they've had less control over what happens to them and have therefore had to be more vigilant for danger.

If you are someone who tends to ruminate, or who suffers from anxiety and depression, it's important that you *don't judge yourself* for this way of being. Remember that rumination on negative thoughts and emotions stems from the underlying desire to be safe. Even though these brain patterns may be counterproductive, we can still honor them for trying so diligently to keep us out of the jaws of that crocodile. Also re-

member that although some people tend to ruminate more than others, all people have a negativity bias to some extent. It's hardwired in our brains.

Breaking Free of the Ties That Bind

So how do we release ourselves from this deep-rooted tendency to wallow in black goo? By giving ourselves compassion. Research shows that self-compassionate people tend to experience fewer negative emotions—such as fear, irritability, hostility, or distress—than those who lack self-compassion. These emotions still come up, but they aren't as frequent, long lasting, or persistent. This is partly because self-compassionate people have been found to ruminate much less than those who lack self-compassion. Rumination is often fueled by feelings of fear, shame, and inadequacy. Because self-compassion directly counters these insecurities, it can help unravel the knot of negative rumination as surely as detangling spray.

When we hold negative thoughts and feelings in nonjudgmental awareness, we are able to pay attention to them without getting stuck like Velcro. Mindfulness allows us to see that our negative thoughts and emotions are just that—thoughts and emotions—not necessarily reality. They are therefore given less weight—they are *observed,* but not necessarily *believed.* In this way, negatively biased thoughts and emotions are allowed to arise and pass away without resistance. This allows us to deal with whatever life brings our way with greater equanimity.

A useful method of mindfully relating to our negative emotions is to become aware of them as a physical sensation. This may seem like an unfamiliar concept, but all emotions can be felt in the body. Anger is often experienced as a tight clenching in the jaw or gut, sadness as heaviness around the eyes, fear as a gripping sensation in one's throat. The physical manifestation of emotions will be experienced differently by

different people and will shift and change over time, but still they can be tracked in the body if we pay close attention. When we experience our emotions on the physical level, rather than *thinking* about what's making us so unhappy, it's easier to stay present. It's the difference between noticing "tightness in my chest" and thinking *I can't believe she said that to me; who does she think she is?* And so on and so on . . . By staying anchored in our body, we can soothe and comfort ourselves for the pain we're feeling without getting lost in negativity.

For some reason I often wake up at about four A.M. in a negative, anxious mind-state. While I lie there in bed my mind swirls with fear and dissatisfaction, focusing in on everything that's wrong in my life. Because it happens so regularly, I've learned to envision this mood quite literally as a storm passing in the night. Rather than getting caught up in my thoughts, I try to imagine dark clouds passing overhead, complete with violent lightning and thunder. The lightning represents the agitation in my brain, which is somehow triggered by my sleep cycle. Instead of taking the mood too seriously, I try to ground my awareness in my body: the weight of my body on the bed, the feel of the blanket on top of me, the sensations in my hands and feet. I try to remember to be in the here and now, and just watch the storm pass over. And sure enough, I eventually fall back asleep and wake up in a much better mood. This is the power of mindfulness. It allows you to fully experience what's arising in the present moment without being caught by it.

Often, however, mindfulness alone is not enough to avoid getting trapped in depressed and anxious mind-states. Try as we may, sometimes our minds just keep getting stuck in negativity. In this case, we need to actively try to soothe ourselves. By being kind to ourselves when we experience black goo mind, remembering our inherent interconnectedness, we start to feel cared for, accepted, and secure. We balance the dark energy of negative emotions with the bright energy of love and social connection. These feelings of warmth and safety then deactivate the body's threat system and activate the attachment system, calming

down the amygdala and ramping up the production of oxytocin. Fortunately, research shows that oxytocin helps dampen our natural negativity bias.

In one study, researchers asked participants to identify the emotions displayed on people's faces in a series of photos. Half were given a nasal spray that contained oxytocin; the other half received a placebo spray (the control group). Volunteers who had received the oxytocin spray were slower to identify fearful facial expression in the photos, and were less likely to mistake positive facial emotions for negative ones, as compared with the control group. This means that oxytocin lessens the tendency of our mind to immediately latch on to negative information.

Relating to our negative thoughts and emotions with compassion, then, is a good way to lessen our negativity bias. Compassion stops rumination in its tracks, engendering a hopeful outlook that asks "How can I calm and comfort myself right now?"

Exercise One

Dealing with Difficult Emotions in the Body: Soften, Soothe, Allow

(Also available as a guided meditation in MP3 format at www.self-compassion.org)

The next time you experience a difficult emotion and want to work with it directly, try processing the emotion in your body (this exercise will take fifteen to twenty minutes).

To begin, sit in a comfortable position or lie down with your back on the floor. Try to locate the difficult feeling in your body. Where is it centered? In your head, your throat, your heart, your stomach? Describe the emotion using mental noting—tingling,

burning, pressure, tightness, sharp stabbing (sorry, but typically sensations like pleasant bubbling don't come up when dealing with emotional pain). Is the sensation hard and solid, or fluid and shifting? Sometimes all you will feel is numbness—you can bring your attention to this sensation as well.

If the feeling is particularly distressing and difficult to experience, go gently. You want to try to soften any resistance you feel toward the sensation, so that you can feel it fully, but you don't want to push yourself beyond your limits. Sometimes it helps to first focus on the outer edge of the sensation, moving inward only if it starts feeling safer and more bearable.

Once you feel in touch with the painful emotion in your body, send it compassion. Tell yourself how difficult it is to feel this right now, and let yourself know you're concerned about your well-being. Try using terms of endearment if it feels comfortable for you, like "I know this is really difficult, darling," or "I'm sorry you're in such pain, dear." Imagine mentally caressing the spot where the painful emotion is lodged, as if you were stroking the head of a child who was crying. Reassure yourself that it's okay, that all will be well, and that you will give yourself the emotional support needed to get through this difficult experience.

When you find yourself carried away by thinking about the situation driving your painful feelings (which you're likely to do), simply bring your awareness back to the physical sensation in your body, and start again.

When doing this exercise, it often helps to silently repeat the phrase "Soften, soothe, allow." This reminds you to accept the feeling as it is, softening any resistance to it, while actively soothing and consoling yourself for any discomfort you feel.

As you give yourself compassion, notice if the physical

sensations you experience change. Is there any lessening or relief from the painful sensations? Do they become easier to bear over time? Does that solid mass of tension feel like it's starting to break up, to move and shift? Whether or not things seem to get better, worse, or stay the same, keep giving yourself compassion for what you're experiencing.

Then, when you feel it's the right time, get up, do a few stretches, and carry on with your day. With some practice you'll find that you can help yourself cope with difficult situations without having to delve deeply into thinking or problem-solving mode, the power of self-compassion working its magic on your body itself.

Feeling It All

Self-compassion helps lessen the hold of negative emotions, but it's important to remember that self-compassion does not push negative emotions away in an aversive manner either. This point is often confusing, because conventional wisdom (and the famous Johnny Mercer tune) tells us that we should accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. The problem, however, is that if you try to eliminate the negative, it's going to backfire. Mental or emotional resistance to pain merely exacerbates suffering (remember, Suffering = Pain × Resistance). Our subconscious registers any attempt at avoidance or suppression, so that what we're trying to avoid ends up being amplified.

Psychologists have conducted a great deal of research on our ability to consciously suppress unwanted thoughts and emotions. Their findings are clear: *we have no such ability*. Paradoxically, any attempt to consciously suppress unwanted thoughts and emotions appears to only make them stronger. In one classic study, participants were asked to report the thoughts that were going through their heads for a period

of five minutes. Before doing so, however, they were instructed *not* to think of a white bear. If they *did* end up thinking of a white bear, they were asked to ring a small bell. Bells pealed forth like it was Christmastime. In the next study, participants were asked to go ahead and think about a white bear for five minutes, actively visualizing it, before they were asked *not* to think about a white bear. Once again, they were instructed to report on their thoughts for a five-minute interval and ring a bell whenever they thought of a white bear. Bells rang out much less often. The attempt to suppress unwanted thoughts causes them to emerge into conscious awareness more strongly and more frequently than if they were given attention in the first place. (Interestingly, a white bear was chosen for the preceding experiment because it is said that Fyodor Dostoyevsky, while attempting to illustrate the persuasive power of the mind, challenged his brother to stand in the corner of a room and not return until he had stopped thinking of a white bear. Needless to say, his brother missed supper that night.)

Research shows that people with higher levels of self-compassion are significantly less likely to suppress unwanted thoughts and emotions than those who lack self-compassion. They're more willing to experience their difficult feelings and to acknowledge that their emotions are valid and important. This is because of the safety provided by self-compassion. It's not as scary to confront emotional pain when you know that you will be supported throughout the process. Just as it feels easier to open up to a close friend whom you can rely on to be caring and understanding, it's easier to open up to yourself when you can trust that your pain will be held in compassionate awareness.

The beauty of self-compassion is that instead of *replacing* negative feelings with positive ones, new positive emotions are generated by *embracing* the negative ones. The positive emotions of care and connectedness are felt alongside our painful feelings. When we have compassion for ourselves, sunshine and shadow are both experienced simultaneously. This is important—ensuring that the fuel of resistance isn't added

to the fire of negativity. It also allows us to celebrate the entire range of human experience, so that we can become whole. As Marcel Proust said, "We are healed from suffering only by experiencing it to the full."

A Journey to Wholeness

The road to becoming whole takes some time to travel and doesn't happen overnight. Rachel was a good friend of mine back in graduate school, and though she was witty and intelligent, she could also be a bit of a black hole. The T-shirt she was wearing when I first met her pretty much sums it up: LIFE'S A BITCH, 'CAUSE IF IT WAS A SLUT IT'D BE EASY. Rachel was a classic negative thinker, always seeing the glass as half empty rather than half full. Even when everything was going relatively well, with only a few challenges to deal with, Rachel would focus almost exclusively on what was wrong in any given situation. She took everything that was right about her life for granted, because it wasn't a problem and therefore didn't need fixing. This meant she was often anxious, frustrated, and depressed.

I remember one time Rachel made a homemade chocolate cake for my birthday. The cake was delicious, despite the fact that the grocery store had been out of her favorite brand of chocolate and she was forced to use an alternate brand that wasn't as good. No matter how much I told her I loved the cake, she could only focus on its ever-so-slightly-less-sumptuous-than-usual quality. (I think her comment was "tastes like imitation Ding Dongs.") She fell into such a foul mood while obsessing about the cake that she actually ended up leaving my birthday party early.

I could handle Rachel's negativity because she often made me laugh. Like the time I asked her how her blind date went. "A total bore. I asked him how he was and he actually told me." The boyfriend she had

during graduate school didn't find her so funny, however, and eventually dumped her for being such a bummer all of the time. She then started to get down on herself for being so negative, which of course just made things worse.

Once she finished her studies, Rachel swore she was going to change her ways. After reading some books on positive thinking, Rachel started saying daily positive affirmations, like "I am a radiant person of positive energy" and "Every day in every way I am getting better and better." She tried to think positively no matter what the circumstances, even if she felt miserable inside. She kept it up for a few months, but it didn't last long. It seemed phony to her and took way too much effort.

Rachel and I kept in touch over the years. When she asked what I was up to, I told her about my research on self-compassion. At first she wasn't impressed. "Isn't that just sugar coating for the fact that life sucks?" But because we were old friends and she valued my opinion, she managed to get through her initial resistance and listened as I explained the concept to her. She didn't say anything for a while, and I assumed she was going to roll her eyes and dismiss everything I had said. Instead, she told me that she wanted to try to be more compassionate with herself and asked for my help. What should she do? So I told her what I did.

I had developed this practice years earlier to help myself remember to be self-compassionate, and I still use it constantly. It's a sort of self-compassion mantra and is highly effective for dealing with negative emotions. Whenever I notice something about myself I don't like, or whenever something goes wrong in my life, I silently repeat the following phrases:

This is a moment of suffering.
Suffering is part of life.
May I be kind to myself in this moment.
May I give myself the compassion I need.

I find these phrases particularly useful, not only because they're short and easily memorized, but because they invoke all three aspects of self-compassion simultaneously. The first phrase, "This is a moment of suffering," is important because it brings mindfulness to the fact that you're in pain. If you're upset because you notice you've gained a few pounds, or if you get pulled over for a traffic violation, it's often hard to remember that these are moments of suffering worthy of compassion.

The second phrase, "Suffering is part of life," reminds you that imperfection is part of the shared human condition. You don't need to fight against the fact that things aren't exactly as you want them to be, because this is a normal, natural state of affairs. More than that, it's one that every other person on the planet also experiences, and you're certainly not alone in your predicament.

The third phrase, "May I be kind to myself in this moment," helps bring a sense of caring concern to your present experience. Your heart starts to soften when you soothe and comfort yourself for the pain you're going through.

The final phrase, "May I give myself the compassion I need," firmly sets your intention to be self-compassionate and reminds you that you are worthy of receiving compassionate care.

After a few weeks of practicing this self-compassion mantra, Rachel started to get a small taste of freedom from her constantly negative mind-set. She began to be more aware of her dark, depressive thoughts, so that she didn't become so hopelessly lost in gloominess. She found herself being less self-critical, and she didn't complain as much about what was wrong with her life. Instead, when she experienced negative thoughts and emotions, she said her phrases and tried to focus on the fact that she was hurting and in need of care.

The thing she liked most about self-compassion, she told me, was that "I don't have to fool myself to make it work." Unlike the practice of positive affirmations, in which she tried to convince herself that everything was fine and dandy even when it wasn't, self-compassion enabled

Rachel to accept and acknowledge the fact that sometimes, life *does* suck. But we don't have to make things worse than they already are. The key to self-compassion is not to deny suffering, but to recognize that it's perfectly normal. There isn't anything wrong with the imperfection of life as long as we don't expect it to be other than it is.

"It's weird," she said, "but sometimes my negativity vanishes as soon as I say the phrases. Even though I'm not trying to make them go away, they just go—poof—like a cheesy David Copperfield show."

Rachel didn't become some kind of Pollyanna, however. She is still someone who tends to notice what's wrong about a situation before she sees what's right. But her negativity doesn't cause her to descend into depression anymore. She can laugh at the darkness of her own thoughts, because they no longer fully control her. Once she remembers to be self-compassionate, she can appreciate the half of the glass that's full as well as noticing the half that's empty.

Exercise Two

Developing Your Own Self-Compassion Mantra

A self-compassion mantra is a set of memorized phrases that are repeated silently whenever you want to give yourself compassion. They are most useful in the heat of the moment, whenever strong feelings of distress arise.

You might find that the phrases I created work for you, but it's worth playing with them to see if you can find phrases that fit you better. What's important is that all three aspects of self-compassion are evoked, not the particular words used.

Other possible wordings for the first phrase, "This is a moment of suffering," are "I'm having a really hard time right now," "It's painful for me to feel this now," and so on.

Other possible wordings for the second phrase, "Suffering is part of life," are "Everyone feels this way sometimes," "This is part of being human," and so on.

Other possible wordings for the third phrase, "May I be kind to myself in this moment," are "May I hold my pain with tenderness," "May I be gentle and understanding with myself," and so on.

Other possible wordings for the final phrase, "May I give myself the compassion I need," are "I am worthy of receiving self-compassion," "I will try to be as compassionate as possible," and so on.

Find the four phrases that seem most comfortable for you and repeat them until you have them memorized. Then, the next time you judge yourself or have a difficult experience, you can use your mantra to help remind yourself to be more self-compassionate. It's a handy tool to help soothe and calm troubled states of mind.

Self-Compassion and Emotional Intelligence

Self-compassion is a powerful form of emotional intelligence. As defined in Daniel Goleman's influential book of the same name, emotional intelligence involves the ability to monitor your own emotions and to skillfully use this information to guide your thinking and action—in other words, being *aware* of your feelings without being hijacked by them, so that you can make wise choices. If you realize that you're mad at someone who made an insensitive comment, for instance, you might take a walk around the block to cool down before discussing it, rather than spouting the first disparaging remark that springs to mind. Perhaps better *not* to say, "Calling you an idiot would be an insult to all the stupid people," satisfying though it may be at the time.

Research shows that people who are more self-compassionate have more emotional intelligence, meaning they are better able to maintain emotional balance when flustered. For example, one study looked at people's reactions to an awkward and embarrassing task—being videotaped while looking into a camera and making up a children's story that began "Once upon a time there was a little bear . . ." Participants were later asked to watch their taped performances and report on the emotions they experienced while doing so. Those with higher levels of self-compassion were more likely to say they felt happy, relaxed, and peaceful while watching themselves make up the silly story. Those who lacked self-compassion were more likely to feel sad, embarrassed, or nervous.

Another study looked at the way self-compassionate people tend to deal with negative events in their daily lives. Participants were asked to report on problems experienced over a twenty-day period, such as having a fight with a romantic partner or tension at work. Results indicated that people with higher levels of self-compassion had more perspective on their problems and were less likely to feel isolated by them. For example, they felt their struggles were no worse than what lots of other people were going through. Self-compassionate people also experienced less anxiety and self-consciousness when thinking about their problems.

There is also physiological data supporting the claim that self-compassionate people have better emotional coping skills. Researchers measured cortisol levels and heart rate variability among a group of people trained to have more self-compassion. Cortisol is a stress hormone, while heart rate variability is an indicator of the ability to adapt effectively to stress. The more self-compassionate versus self-critical that people were, the lower their cortisol levels and the higher their heart rate variability. This suggests that self-compassionate people are able to deal with the challenges life throws their way with greater emotional equanimity.

Of course, people who experience extreme life challenges—such as

almost dying in a car accident or being sexually assaulted—may have an especially hard time coping. In such cases, people may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a severe and ongoing emotional reaction to an extreme psychological trauma. It often involves reexperiencing the traumatic event through flashbacks or nightmares, having disturbed sleep patterns, and persistent fear or anger. One of the key symptoms of PTSD is experiential avoidance, which means that trauma victims tend to push away uncomfortable emotions associated with what happened. Unfortunately, such avoidance only makes PTSD symptoms worse, given that suppressed emotions tend to grow stronger as they vie to break through to conscious awareness. The effort needed to keep suppressed emotions at bay can also sap the energy needed to deal with frustration, meaning that PTSD sufferers are often irritable.

There is some evidence that self-compassion helps people get through PTSD. For example, in one study of college students who showed PTSD symptoms after experiencing a traumatic event such as an accident, a fire, or a life-threatening illness, those with more self-compassion showed less severe symptoms than those who lacked self-compassion. In particular, they were less likely to display signs of emotional avoidance and were more comfortable facing the thoughts, feelings, and sensations triggered by what happened. When you're willing to feel painful emotions and hold them with compassion, they're less likely to interfere with everyday life.

Self-compassion gives us the calm courage needed to face our unwanted emotions head-on. Because escape from painful feelings is not actually possible, our best option is to clearly but compassionately experience our difficult emotions just as they are in the present moment. Given that all experiences eventually come to an end, if we can allow ourselves to remain present with our pain, it can go through its natural bell-curve cycle—arising, peaking, and fading away. As it says in the Bible, "This too shall pass." Or as the Buddha said, all emotions are "liable to destruction, to evanescence, to fading away, to cessation."

Painful feelings are, by their very nature, temporary. They will weaken over time as long as we don't prolong or amplify them through resistance or avoidance. The only way to eventually free ourselves from debilitating pain, therefore, is to *be* with it as it is. *The only way out is through.* We need to bravely turn toward our suffering, comforting ourselves in the process, so that time can work its healing magic.

The Healing Power of Self-Compassion

Penny—a forty-six-year-old divorced sales rep—suffered from near constant anxiety. When her twenty-one-year-old daughter, Erin (who was away at college), didn't call her for a few days, she immediately assumed that something was wrong. She would leave Erin desperate phone messages asking her if she was okay, assuming that no news was bad news. Or when Erin was home, if she overheard her say something like "Oh no!" while talking on her cell, she would interrupt the conversation, frantically asking "What's wrong, what's wrong?" Although Erin loved her mother, she dreaded coming home for visits because her mother was always so tense and nervous. Penny was aware of her daughter's reluctance and harshly judged herself for being such an uptight and uneasy person. It wasn't how she wanted to be.

Erin was pretty convinced her mother's anxiety was caused by unresolved emotional trauma. Penny's father had been declared missing in action in the Vietnam War, when Penny was only six. Penny's mother had a nervous breakdown upon receiving the news, so Penny was raised by her maternal grandmother for two years before her mother was able to take care of her again. Penny's father was never found, and she never really got to properly grieve for him. The result was that Penny irrationally feared losing her daughter, Erin, in the same way she lost her father—anxiety permeating every corner of her life.

Erin had heard a guest lecture on self-compassion at her university

and tried to convince her mother that she should have more compassion for herself. "I want you to be happy, Mom," she said, "and I think it would help you. I also think it would help our relationship."

Mainly out of love for her daughter, Penny reluctantly decided to enter therapy, choosing a counselor who explicitly incorporated self-compassion into his therapeutic approach. She wanted to finally get to grips with her anxiety and also to deal with the grief she felt over the loss of her father. Her therapist advised her to go slowly, only feeling as much as was comfortable at any one time.

Penny first tried to focus on having compassion for the anxiety she felt as an adult. She began to realize how much she suffered from having a fist of fear ready to clamp tight over her heart at any time. Her therapist gently reminded her that anxiety was an incredibly common experience, something that millions and millions of other people struggle with on a daily basis. Over time Penny learned to judge herself a little less severely for being anxious, and she instead started trying to comfort herself for having such constant and uncontrollable fear. Once she felt ready, she was then able to turn her attention to the source of her fear: the experience of losing her mother and father at the same time when she was only a small child.

At first Penny mainly focused on the compassion she felt for her mother, which somehow felt more manageable. Her heart started to crack open as she thought about the horror her mother must have experienced when her husband was declared missing, not even knowing for sure if he was dead or alive. Then she tried feeling compassion for herself, for how scared and alone she felt when her father disappeared and her mother had her breakdown. At first she was just numb, unable to feel anything.

The therapist asked her to bring a picture of herself as a young girl to their next session, to see if that would help. The photo was of a six-year-old girl wearing a maroon velvet dress, opening Christmas presents. When Penny looked at the photo, she saw the face of Erin looking back at her. She imagined how Erin would have felt at age six if the same thing had happened to her. This broke through her defenses, and she had a powerful moment of getting in touch with her six-year-old self—the incredible fear, confusion, and sadness she had felt.

For several weeks all Penny could do was sob whenever she thought about her childhood. There was nothing she could do to fix things, to change what had happened. There was nothing she could do to ensure that her daughter would never have any harm befall her. There was only pain, sadness, grief, worry, and fear. But there was also compassion. Whenever she felt that she would be engulfed by her negative emotions, she would think of that picture of herself as a child. She would imagine stroking the child's hair, using a gentle tone of voice and telling her that she was going to be okay. Although the anxiety didn't go away, its edges started to soften. It became more bearable, less overwhelming.

One day Penny came to her therapy appointment extremely excited. "Erin was home yesterday and I heard her say 'That's terrible! Oh my God!' on her cell phone. My instinctive reaction was to immediately demand what was wrong. Instead, I just let myself feel the fear. I managed not to pounce on Erin as soon as she hung up the phone. Instead, I figured that if there was a dire emergency she would tell me. It was hard to wait, but I felt strong enough to handle it. And sure enough, it turns out that her favorite TV character had been killed off in the latest episode. That was all. What a victory!"

Such stories are actually quite common. Especially when helped along by a supportive person such as a therapist, self-compassion has the power to radically transform lives. For this reason, many clinical psychologists are starting to explicitly incorporate self-compassion into their therapeutic approaches.

Compassionate Mind Training

Paul Gilbert, a clinician at the University of Derby and author of *The Compassionate Mind,* is one of the leading thinkers and researchers on self-compassion as a therapeutic tool. He has developed a group-based therapy model called "Compassionate Mind Training" (CMT), which is designed to help people who suffer from severe shame and self-judgment. His approach focuses on helping clients understand the harm they do themselves through constant self-criticism, while also having compassion for these same tendencies. Gilbert argues that self-criticism is an evolutionarily based survival mechanism designed to help keep oneself safe (see chapter 2) and therefore should not be judged. CMT helps people to understand this mechanism and teaches them how to relate to themselves with compassion rather than self-condemnation. This process can be tricky for some.

Many of Gilbert's patients have a history of being abused by their parents, either physically or emotionally. For this reason, they are often frightened of self-compassion at first, and they feel vulnerable when they are kind to themselves. This is because as children, the same people who gave them care and nurturance—their parents—also betrayed their trust by harming them. Feelings of warmth thus became jumbled together with feelings of fear, making the foray into self-compassion rather complicated. Gilbert cautions that people with a history of parental abuse should proceed slowly down the path of self-compassion, so that they don't become too frightened or overwhelmed. Even among those without histories of physical or mental abuse, Gilbert's research indicates that people are often afraid of being compassionate to themselves. They worry that they will become weak, or that they will be rejected, if they don't use self-criticism as a way of addressing personal shortcomings. This fear of compassion then acts as a roadblock to treating oneself kindly and exacerbates self-judgment and feelings of inadequacy.

CMT relies heavily on the practice of self-compassionate imagery to generate feelings of warmth and safety for clients. Practitioners first instruct patients to generate an image of a safe place to help counter any fears that may arise. They are then instructed to create an ideal image of a caring and compassionate figure. Especially for people who have a hard time having feelings of compassion for themselves, their compassionate image can be used as a proxy source of soothing. Eventually, self-compassion becomes less frightening and can be drawn upon to help deal with feelings of defectiveness and inadequacy.

In a study of the effectiveness of CMT for patients in a treatment program at a mental health hospital—people who were being treated for intense shame and self-criticism—patients were led through weekly two-hour CMT sessions for twelve weeks. The training resulted in significant reductions in depression, self-attacking, feelings of inferiority, and shame. Moreover, almost all of the patients felt ready to be discharged from the hospital at the end of the intervention.

Exercise Three

Using Compassionate Imagery

This exercise is adapted from Paul Gilbert, *The Compassionate Mind* (London: Constable, 2009).

1. Sit comfortably in a quiet spot. The first task is to create an image of a safe place. This can be imaginary or real—any place that makes you feel peaceful, calm, and relaxed: a white sandy beach, a forest glade with deer grazing nearby, Grandmother's kitchen, or near a crackling fire. Try to really envisage this place in your mind's eye. What are the colors? How bright is it? What sounds or smells are there? If you ever feel

anxious or insecure during your voyage into self-compassion, you can call up this image of your safe place to help calm and soothe yourself.

2. The next task is to create an image of an ideally caring and compassionate figure, someone who embodies wisdom, strength, warmth, and nonjudgmental acceptance. For some this will be a known religious figure like Christ or the Buddha. For others it will be someone they have known in the past who was very compassionate, like a favorite aunt or teacher. For still others it might be a beloved pet, a completely imaginary being, or even an abstract image like a white light. Try to see this image as vividly as possible, incorporating as many of the senses as possible.

3. If you are suffering in some way right now, think about the type of wise, caring things that this idealized source of compassion would say to comfort you right now. How would his or her voice sound? What feelings would be conveyed in his or her tone? If you're feeling a bit numb or shut down, just let yourself bask in the compassionate presence of your ideal image, simply allowing yourself to be there.

4. Now release your compassionate image, take a few breaths, and sit quietly in your own body, savoring the comfort and ease that you generated in your own mind and body. Know that whenever you want to generate compassion for yourself, you can use this image as a springboard, allowing yourself to receive the gift of kindness.

Mindful Self-Compassion

Christopher Germer, a clinical psychologist affiliated with Harvard who specializes in the integration of mindfulness and psychotherapy, teaches

self-compassion to most of his therapy clients. Chris is also a friend and colleague with whom I teach self-compassion workshops. He wrote the wonderful book *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion,* which summarizes the knowledge he's gained over the years while helping his clients to relate to themselves more compassionately.

Germer observes that his clients typically go through several distinct stages of self-compassion practice during their therapy. A common experience at the beginning, especially for those who suffer from intense feelings of worthlessness, is "backdraft." When a fire is deprived of oxygen and fresh air is suddenly let in, an explosion often occurs (the process known by firefighters as backdraft). Similarly, people who are used to constant self-criticism often erupt with anger and intense negativity when they first try to take a kinder, more gentle approach with themselves. It's as if their sense of self has been so invested in feeling inadequate that this "worthless self" fights for survival when it's threatened. The way to deal with backdraft, of course, is to mindfully accept the experience and have compassion for how hard it is to experience such intense negativity.

Once the initial resistance softens, clients often feel great enthusiasm for self-compassion practice as they begin to realize what a powerful tool it is. Germer calls this the "infatuation" stage. After battling themselves for so long, people often fall in love with the feeling of peace and freedom they find by relating to themselves in a tender way. Like receiving a kiss from a new lover, they tingle from head to toe. During this stage, people tend to get attached to the good feelings provided by self-compassion, and they want to experience those good feelings constantly.

As time goes on, however, the infatuation typically fades as people realize that self-compassion doesn't magically make all their negative thoughts and feelings go away. Remember that self-compassion doesn't eradicate pain or negative experiences, it just embraces them with kindness and gives them space to transform on their own. When people practice self-compassion as a subtle way of resisting their negative emo-

tions, not only will the bad feelings remain, they will often get worse. Germer says that he sees this phase of the therapy process as a good sign, because it means clients can begin to question their motivations. Are they being compassionate primarily because they want to be emotionally healthy, or because they mainly want to eliminate their pain?

If people can stick with the practice during this tricky middle bit, they eventually discover the wisdom of "true acceptance." During this stage, the motivation for self-compassion shifts from "cure" to "care." The fact that life is painful, and that we are all imperfect, is then fully accepted as an integral part of being alive. It becomes understood that happiness is not dependent on circumstances being exactly as we want them to be, or on ourselves being exactly as we'd like to be. Rather, happiness stems from loving ourselves and our lives exactly as they are, knowing that joy and pain, strength and weakness, glory and failure are all essential to the full human experience.

Chris Germer and I are now working on an exciting new project together; developing an eight-week training program in Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC). The program is similar to Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program, and we hope it will be a useful complement to it. In the first day of the program, we mainly focus on explaining the concept of self-compassion and how it differs from self-esteem (see chapter 7). In the following weeks we focus on how to use self-compassion to deal with difficult emotions using various meditations, homework assignments, and experiential exercises (including those found in this chapter and others). The program appears to be quite powerful in terms of changing people's lives for the better, and hopefully we'll soon have research data that examines the effectiveness of MSC as a therapeutic intervention. We are both convinced that participating in the MSC program will help people maximize their emotional resilience and well-being. (For more information on the program, go to www.self-compassion.org or www.mindfulselfcompassion.org.)

Exercise Four

Compassionate Body Scan

(Also available as a guided meditation in MP3 format at www.self-compassion.org)

One technique commonly taught in mindfulness courses such as MBSR is "the body scan." The idea is to systematically sweep your attention from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet, bringing mindful awareness to all of the physical sensations in your body. Chris Germer and I also use this technique in our MSC workshops, but with a twist. We add in self-compassion. The idea is that whenever you come into contact with an uncomfortable sensation while scanning your body, you should try to actively soothe the tension, giving yourself compassion for your suffering. By mentally caressing your body in this way, you can help ease your aches and pains to a remarkable extent.

To begin, it's best to lie down on a bed or the floor. Lie flat on your back, and gently rest your arms about six inches away from your sides and hold your legs about shoulder width apart. This is called "the corpse pose" in yoga, and allows you to completely relax all your muscles. Start with the crown of your head. Notice what your scalp feels like. Is it itching, tingling, hot, cold? Then notice if there's any discomfort there. If so, try to relax and soften any tension in this area and extend kind, caring concern to this part of your body. Internal words said in a soothing, comforting voice like "poor darling, there's a lot of tightness there, it's okay, just relax" often help tremendously. Once you've given this body part

compassion, or if there was no discomfort in the first place, move on to the next body part.

There are many pathways through the body you can take, but typically I move from the top of my head to my face, to the back of my head, to my neck, my shoulders, my right arm (moving from upper arm to lower arm to hand), my left arm, my chest, my abdomen, my back, my pelvic region, my gluts, my right leg (moving from thigh to knee to calf to foot), then my left leg. Other people start with their feet and move up through their body to the crown of their head. There is no one right way to do it, just what feels right for you.

As you scan each new body part with your awareness, check in to see if there is any tension there, and offer yourself compassion for your pain, consciously trying to soften, relax, and comfort this area. I often try to express gratitude to the body part that aches, appreciating how hard it works for me (like my neck, which has to hold up my big head!). It's an opportunity to be kind to yourself in a very concrete way, and the more slowly and mindfully you do the exercise, the more you'll get out of it.

Once you finish sweeping your awareness from head to toe—this can take anywhere from five minutes to thirty minutes depending on how quickly you do it—bring your attention to your entire body with all its buzzing, pulsating sensations, and send yourself love and compassion. Most people report feeling wonderfully relaxed yet vibrant after this exercise—and it's cheaper than a massage.

Chapter Seven

OPTING OUT OF THE SELF-ESTEEM GAME

Don't take the ego too seriously. When you detect egoic behavior in yourself, smile. At times you may even laugh. How could humanity have been taken in by this for so long?

—Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*

The idea that we need to have high self-esteem to be psychologically healthy is so widespread in Western culture that people are terrified of doing anything that might endanger it. We're told we must think positively of ourselves at all costs. Teachers are encouraged to give all their students gold stars so that each can feel proud and special. High self-esteem is portrayed as the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, a precious commodity that must be acquired and protected.

It's true that people with high self-esteem tend to be cheerful, report having lots of friends, and are motivated in life, while people with low self-esteem are lonely, anxious, and depressed. Those with high self-