

Pathways to Wellness

Module 1: Self Awareness and Compassion

Purpose:

- To understand the importance of self-awareness and self-compassion as they relate to levels of stress, personal stressors, internal and external relationships, and behavior patterns.

Benefit:

- To be better able to manage our well-being during times of higher stress.

Responsibility:

- Our responsibility is to develop a robust program
- Your responsibility is to engage fully

Process:

- Doing the stress assessment
- Watching the videos
- Engaging in the practices

Part One: Self Awareness

Poem: I Miss Green by Thomas W Case

My window of
tolerance is
more like a peep hole.
My comfort zone has gone
to hell.
They say, fight or flight;
I tend to freeze.
I miss the easy
days of youth,
when everything was
green and serene.
The cicadas and bobwhites

sang me to sleep.
The fields and streams
called to me.
I dreamed of
fish and candy
and the perfect girl.
I smelled love and
tasted simplicity.
I pray someday,
my window grows

What is self-awareness?

Self-awareness is being aware of who you are—of your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Having self-awareness doesn't mean you have to thoroughly understand every single emotion you have or justify every thought. Instead, being self-aware simply means you observe your internal and external experiences.

Self-awareness is a prerequisite for choice and control. If your thoughts and feelings are operating outside of awareness, then they control you. If you want to control them, the first thing is to open up a window of awareness that is an opportunity to pause and consider, before choosing, deciding, and acting.

Hogan explains three main components of self-awareness:

- Understanding our own strengths and opportunities for change and growth
- Understanding how our strengths and challenges relate to those of others
- Understanding how to adapt our behavior to increase our effectiveness

Why is self-awareness important?

- Why is self-awareness so important when we're talking about stress? Because stress is a physical or mental response, we must recognize what we're experiencing and why. If you're self-aware, you might realize that you're not eating as healthy as you used to, you're feeling anxious, or that your work has become more challenging and cut into your free time.
- In this way, self-awareness can help reduce stress—if you first start to recognize the causes, you can then more effectively manage the stressor or response.

Part Two: Self-Compassion

Connection to Awareness: being self-aware simply means you observe your internal and external experiences. Compassion means to dive a little deeper into a situation with self - compassion brings along loving kindness and care into that situation.

What is Self-Compassion?

Compassion may be described as a feeling of concern that arises when we are confronted with our own or another's suffering and feel motivated to see that suffering relieved. Self-compassion allows us to hold space to soothe, care for, hold space for our needs, and genuinely accept ourselves. It is creating a friendly environment for oneself where we might ask questions with more openness and acceptance like:

- What do I need?
- How might I accept myself in this situation?
- What feelings are arising for me?

“Over 75% of people are significantly more compassionate to others than themselves” ~ Kristen Neff

When we slow down and sit in our awareness, we hold space for ourselves and are witness to what is unfolding in our lives. Our awareness brings us closer to ourselves in both joyful and stressful times. Taking the time to contemplate the inner landscape is a form of self-compassion. Seeing ourselves and ‘being there’ for ourselves is something that we can all do.

A **Lovingkindness** practice can be very helpful in becoming friendly with oneself. Sitting and visualizing the self in a situation or at a particular time of life and then sending ourselves kindness and care can be very beneficial and accessible. Studies show that loving-kindness meditation helps in reducing self-critical thoughts and behaviors. By directing compassionate feelings towards oneself, individuals can create a mental environment where negative self-judgment is replaced by self-acceptance and kindness. This can gradually improve your self-esteem.

Personal Mantra:

- May I be healthy, May I be peaceful, May I be happy

Compassion stems from our connections, both with others and within ourselves, fostering a sense of unity. Embracing warmth, care, support, and concern for oneself may initially feel unfamiliar, yet engaging in these feelings and actions can catalyze a transformation in our behavioral patterns and cultivate a renewed relationship with ourselves. As Kristin Neff mentions, when practicing self-compassion, individuals delve into various aspects:

- **Self-Kindness over Self-Judgment:** Instead of harshly criticizing ourselves, we extend kindness and understanding towards our own struggles and shortcomings, motivated by a genuine desire to alleviate suffering.
- **Embracing Common Humanity:** Recognizing that our experiences are part of the broader human condition prevents feelings of isolation. By framing our challenges within this context, we open ourselves to opportunities for both giving and receiving kindness, reducing anxiety and tension that arise from feeling alone.
- **Mindfulness versus Over-Identification:** Mindfulness serves as the cornerstone of self-compassion, allowing us to be fully present with our experiences without judgment. This practice involves maintaining a balanced state, wherein we acknowledge and explore our difficult emotions without becoming overwhelmed or overly attached to them.

"**Noticing,**" a fundamental aspect of mindfulness, supports the cultivation of self-compassion. Mindfulness is characterized by an open-hearted, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, encompassing the unfolding of experiences from their emergence to their eventual passing.

Why is Self-Compassion important?

A practice of self-compassion is important because we can access a center of care really close in. We require our workplaces and systems to make shifts, as this very program is doing, however, we bring into our awareness the ability within ourselves to reap the benefits of a self-compassion practice.

There are many benefits to self-compassion:

- Renews our inner resources, to see differently - feeling rejuvenated and renewed
- Setting realistic goals - accepting and understanding our situation, leaning in
- Learning from our experience - leaning forward from where we are
- Feeling less alone - rooted in connection realizing that our family members, co-workers, and friends all have an inner space that needs care - we can understand each other on this level

Part Three: Living into the Practices

Increasing Self-Awareness and Compassion:

We will cultivate three skills to apply our mind to compassion. First, we will learn to quiet the mind. Then we will develop concentration through focused attention. We will also strengthen our awareness or relaxed and open state. These three together are called '**Settling the Mind**'.

Poem: She Let Go by Ernest Holmes

“Without a thought or word, she let go. She let go of the fear. She let go of the judgments. She let go of the confluence of opinions swarming around her head. She let go of the committee of indecision within her. She let go of all the right reasons. Wholly and completely, without hesitation or worry, she just let go. She let go of all the memories that held her back. She let go of all the anxiety that kept her from moving forward. She let go of all the planning and all of the calculations about how to do it just right. She didn't promise to let go. She didn't write the projected date in her day planner. She made no public announcement or put an ad in the newspaper. She didn't check the weather report or read her daily horoscope. She just let go. She didn't analyze it, and she didn't call her friends to discuss it. She didn't call the prayer line. She didn't utter one word. She just let go. No one was around when it happened. There was no applause: no congratulations. No one thanked her or praised her. No one noticed a thing. Like a leaf falling from a tree, she just let go. There was no effort; there was no struggle. It wasn't good; it wasn't bad. It was what it was, and it is just that. In the space of letting go, she let it be. A small smile came over her face...a light breeze blew through her. And the sun shone, and the moon rose.”

What are some of the practices of letting go?

1. Keeping the concept of 'Change' in the forefront of the mind
 - Contemplating and considering the concept of change allows us to realize and understand that life is flowing and that everything will not stay the same.
 - If we take time to pay attention to and be aware of change in our daily life we can allow the unfolding process with ease.
2. Humming

Some of the possible benefits of humming include:

 - Reduced levels of stress
 - Lowered blood pressure and heart rate
 - Increased levels of nitric oxide, a molecule that promotes healing and widens blood vessels

- Improved airflow between the sinuses and the nasal cavity and improvement of the health of your sinuses
3. Here and now rock
 - A physical object, something that is easily held in the hand like a rock or small stone is accessible to reach for when a person is feeling like they are trying to navigate a stressful situation or are nervous about something they have to do. The rock can be a reminder of feeling grounded and centered.
 4. RAIN - The acronym *RAIN*, first coined by Michele McDonald, is an easy-to-remember tool for practicing mindfulness. The RAIN meditation has four steps:
 - Recognize what is going on
 - Allow the experience to be there, just as it is
 - Investigate with kindness
 - Natural awareness comes from not identifying with the experience.

Invitation: Letting Go with the Elements and Time for Reflection

Taking time, reflecting, and writing for ourselves are acts of self-awareness and compassion. The following are suggestions to dive a bit deeper into your own experiences.

1. Take some time to reflect on and write down what you would like to let go of or in other words 'put down' as was suggested in the module.
 - a. Use the 'elements' in your process as we suggested:
 - i. Writing on a piece of paper and letting it go into fire or water
 - ii. Observing fast and recurring thoughts and intentionally going for a walk feeling the wind wash over your face, head, and hair.
 - b. Consider an embodied action that you consider would feel releasing. Make it your own.
2. Take some time to write your reflections on this process.
 - a. How did it feel?
 - b. Were you surprised by what came up?

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