

**Compassion**

Meditation



10-15 min.



Client



Yes



Loving-Kindness Meditation

Loving-kindness means tender and benevolent affection. It is the wish that all beings (you and others) may be happy and that good things may come their way. Loving-kindness meditation teaches us to be a better friend to ourselves. It is a way to increase compassion. Loving-kindness meditation is a form of single-focus meditation. Just as the breath is used as a focal point in the sitting meditation, compassionate phrases in loving-kindness meditation are the focus of our attention. Each and every time our mind starts wandering, we take notice of this and return to these phrases.

Goal

The goal of loving-kindness meditation is to cultivate compassion to ourselves and others. Loving-kindness meditation has four "healing" elements: intention, attention, emotion and connection. "Boosting" our intention ("may everyone be happy") gives energy and meaning to our lives. The focused attention during the exercise calms our mind ("repeatedly return to the sentences"). The positive emotions which emerge contribute to our happiness and the connection we experience in silence creates a feeling of calmness and safety (feeling less alone, less scared).

Advice

When you practice this meditation with clients, it is important to inform them that they should try to let go of any expectations about how they should feel during the meditation. If clients find that they are discouraged by the lack of positive feelings, let them know that they may be gentle and compassionate towards themselves instead. Remind them that the aim is to focus on the wish and the intention, not on creating positive emotions.

It is also important to realize that the purpose of the exercise is not to reduce or eliminate pain or suffering. This exercise teaches clients to adopt a gentler attitude. Obviously, it is not realistic that there will never be pain or suffering, and that you (and others) simply deserve to be happy. Practicing this exercise is like being there for a friend who's not feeling well: you may not be able to heal them but you are able to give them the love and compassion they want and need.

Note that a client can also formulate his/her own phrases. Here are some examples:

May I love myself as I am
May I truly be happy
May I be free of all fear
May I be free of worries
Etc.

Try not to formulate phrases that are too specific, such as “May I get a high grade for this exam”. When a wish has a very specific outcome or result, we wish for it to be granted. Loving-kindness is not an attempt to manipulate our environment with our thoughts.

Loving-kindness meditation can also be integrated with the mindfulness sitting meditation. You could, for example, begin or end the sitting meditation with words of compassion and kindness. This can also assist in bringing more gentleness to your meditation practice. It is also possible to start the loving kindness meditation with a brief sitting meditation. The sitting meditation can help your client to get in a more focused and calm mind state before engaging in the loving-kindness meditation.

Occasionally, clients who practice loving-kindness meditation may notice immediate positive changes after completing the meditation. However, producing lasting change in our feelings, attitudes and thoughts is a slow process that will take time. Therefore, try looking at progress in the long-term, allow clients to practice and then notice the progress they have made. Inform them that patience is required.



Trouble Shooting

When the client finds it difficult to say the sentences to themselves

Option A: Ask your client to think of someone who is suffering in a similar manner as he/she is. Then ask him/her to first focus attention and the sentences on this person. Gradually they can start to include themselves in the sentences (May [Jane] be free of all fear, May [Jane] and I be free of all fear, May we...). Your client can also focus on someone he/she loves very much, such as a child, and then try to remember how they felt when this person was ill or in pain. Then ask them to connect with the feelings of compassion that they experienced when thinking about this person, and repeat the exercise tapping into those feelings.

Option B: For some people it is easier to start the exercise in a more abstract way: “May everyone be happy”. Subsequently, clients can start to include themselves in the sentences. “May I and everyone else be happy”. It might also help to use the name of your client instead of “I” (“May [John] be happy” instead of “May I be happy”).

When the client notices that unpleasant feelings emerge during the meditation

Option A: If we carry doubt and hate within ourselves, the kind words spoken during the meditation may trigger a series of unpleasant or difficult emotions. These emotions are not created by the exercise, yet they are possibly a consequence of the negative way we have spoken to ourselves for all these years. Ask your client to recognize and experience these feelings when they are released. It is a healthy and natural part of the process.

Option B: Use the negative feelings as part of the exercise. When such feelings come to the surface, instruct your client to recognize that they are suffering and to be compassionate by applying the loving-kindness sentences to themselves.

Option C: Try to maintain a balance. If your client notices that the negative emotions are getting too strong, do not push through with the exercise. Possibly, it can become more of a struggle than compassion. You may also turn to the regular sitting meditation and simply continue to focus on your breathing.

When the sentences become empty or robot-like repetitions to your client

Due to repetition, the sentences might become empty or robot-like at some point. This applies to almost every object which receives attention repeatedly. This doesn't mean, however, that the sentences have to be changed. You may invite your client to focus on the wishing-part of the sentence. Concentrate on the intention instead of the feeling-part of the exercise.

When your client feels like the sentences they repeat are meaningless

It can also be the case that your client feels the sentences he/she repeats have no meaning. He/she might ask him/herself: "How is it possible to experience happiness and never fear? That's not very realistic! Aren't stress and fear part of everyone's life?". This is of course true. The hardest part of this exercise is to understand that the purpose of the exercise is not to create a positive outcome, or pose a wish for it to be granted. The true meaning of the phrases is: "Even if it is unrealistic never to experience fear and only happiness, whenever it is possible let it be so. I truly deserve not to feel fear and to feel happiness; however I cannot control what life has in store for me". Explaining this sentiment to your client may help him/her to move forward with the exercise.

When your client notices that they keep thinking: "I don't really want this other person to be happy, because he/she will never change this way."

Whenever you include someone else in the loving-kindness meditation, it doesn't mean that you tolerate hurtful behaviour from this individual or that you permit this person to avoid the negative consequences of their behaviour. The client is simply invited to wish the other person something kind, and then let go of any of the expectations that might come to mind.



Suggested Readings

Neff, K. D. (2004). Self-compassion and psychological well-being. *Constructivism in the Human Sciences*, 9, 27–37.

Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion: Stop beating yourself up and leave insecurity behind*. New York: Morrow. Neff, K. D. (2012).

Neff, K. D., Kirkpatrick, K. L., & Rude, S. S. (2007). Self-compassion and adaptive psychological functioning. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 41, 139–154.



Loving-Kindness Meditation (version 1: self)

Instructions

1. Sit in a comfortable position with your back upright. Close your eyes and bring your attention towards your breath. Remind yourself that every living being wishes to live in peace and happiness. Connect yourself deeply to this desire: "Just as all beings desire to be happy and free from suffering, I am entitled to the same happiness and freedom from suffering". If you wish, you may take a moment to feel what kind of emotions this intention stirs up within you.

2. Repeat the following phrases in silence and serenity:

May I be peaceful

May I be healthy

May I be happy

3. Take a moment to truly and meaningfully comprehend the meaning of each phrase. If necessary, repeat a certain phrase more than once to create more clarity. You may also choose a single word and repeat this to yourself. It is important that you devote yourself to the wishing-part of the exercise: that you truly wish these things for yourself. In other words, it is about the intention, not about the results.

If you notice your mind starts wandering, simply return your attention to the phrases. Don't be harsh on yourself, it is normal to get distracted.

4. Before you finish the exercise, you may also repeat the following phrases in reflective silence:

May I and all other beings be peaceful

May I and all other beings be healthy

May I and all other beings be happy

Loving-Kindness Meditation (version 2: others)

Instructions

1. Loving-kindness meditation can also be aimed at other people. As an object for your meditation, you can keep in mind:

a friend – someone you trust, you are grateful for, and for whom you cherish positive sentiments

a neutral person – someone you don't know personally and therefore do not like or dislike

a difficult person – someone who has hurt you or towards whom you carry negative feelings

a group of people – for example everyone at home, work or in your city

2. Sit in a comfortable position with your back upright. Close your eyes and bring your attention towards your breath. Remind yourself that every living being wishes to live in peace and happiness. Concentrate on a different person (one of the above-mentioned examples) and try to keep them in mind. Tell yourself: as I am entitled to be happy and free of suffering, may you be happy and free of suffering as well.

3. Repeat the following phrases in silence and serenity while keeping this person or group of people in mind:

May you be peaceful

May you be healthy

May you be happy

4. After some time, you can include yourself in the wish as well:

May you and I be peaceful

May you and I be healthy

May you and I be happy

In some cases, such as when thinking of a difficult person, feelings of aversion, anger, shame, guilt or sadness can emerge. While experiencing these emotions, the sentences can start to sound hollow and empty. Simply, label the emotion you experience ("anger") and allow it to be there. Focus the exercise for a minute on yourself again ("May I be happy"). When you start feeling better, you can return to the other person as your focus of attention again.