

**Compassion**

Exercise



3-6 min.



Client



No



S.A.F.E. Self-Compassion Practice

A key objective of “third wave” cognitive behavioural therapies like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (1), Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (2), and Compassion Focussed Therapy (3) is the amelioration of psychological distress through changing the person’s relationship with their problems. More specifically, these therapies aim to cultivate a non-judgmental, compassionate attitude towards the self and strengthen an accepting relationship with the self.

Research has shown that the cultivation of this attitude can alleviate emotional distress and promote well-being, reflected in decreased negative affect and increased positive affect (4, 5, 6). This exercise was designed to help clients apply the principles of self-compassion in real time, when struggling with failure or difficult emotions. Over time, the application of this exercise is expected to cultivate a more compassionate and self-accepting stance towards the self.

Author

This tool is a modification made by Noel Lyons (Noel Lyons MSc –<http://www.WellCoach.co.uk>) of an exercise described by Elisha Goldstein (7).

Goal

SAFE is a self-compassion practice to calm the troubled mind. It can take a client out of autopilot during a difficult moment, change their relationship to the feelings that are there, create insights into what is needed in that moment and connect them to the common humanity behind their struggles.



Advice

- In order to familiarize clients with this technique, the practitioner may invite the client to visualize a recent or upcoming difficult moment. Next the practitioner guides the client in applying the S.A.F.E. method to the uncomfortable feelings of shame, fear, guilt, sadness or anger that may arise as a result of the visualization. Even if clients are unsuccessful in evoking emotions through the visualization, this exercise still allows them to understand what applying the S.A.F.E. method looks like.
- It is advisable to encourage clients to practice SAFE during non-turbulent times to become familiar with it before introducing it into more difficult moments as a self-compassion break.
- Instruct clients too that SAFE is not necessarily a one-time practice. Indeed, it's helpful to keep repeating the steps (one through to four) until they finally feel calmer.
- Allowing or "being with" an emotion represents a 180 degree shift. It widens that space of awareness in which choice and insight lie. Often what feeds or intensifies an emotion is the brain's need to resist it, get away from or hold on to it. Relating to an emotion in a more mindful manner loosens the identification with it, gaining perspective and freedom from it.
- The E step may feel the most unnatural part of the process. But when clients feel anxious, it can feel all about them. Hence, it's helpful to impersonalize the experience and to help them get outside of themselves. The vulnerability, struggle, resistance or any difficulty is also a human experience and is a core component of self-compassion. So help them through connection understand they are not alone in experiencing this very same feeling.
- This tool may be particularly helpful for depressed clients. Depression is the brain's ultimate avoidance strategy; it saps the ability to engage life and creates resistance around doing things that matter. Understanding how depression impacts the brain gives us clues about our natural anti-depressants. A depressed brain has significantly more activity in the right than the left prefrontal cortex. The right side is associated with avoidance, negative emotions and feeling stuck; the left side with approaching, positive emotions and resiliency. Two key natural anti-depressants can create a left prefrontal shift: Mindfulness and compassion (7).

Often depressed people have low self-compassion. Self-compassion is a skill that allows us to intentionally turn the volume down on rumination and to activate the self-soothing states of the brain to provide an experience of safety, courage and resiliency. Self-compassion has also been correlated with well-being traits like hope, gratitude, joy, patience, forgiveness, connection and wisdom (1). So not only can we create an anti-depressant brain, we can also lay the tracks for more enduring happiness.



Suggested Readings

1. Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. New York: Guilford.
2. Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M. G., & Teasdale, J. D. (2002). *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression: A new approach to relapse prevention*. New York: Guilford.
3. Gilbert, P. (2010). An introduction to compassion focused therapy in cognitive behavior therapy. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 3, 97–112.
4. Hofmann, S. G., Sawyer, A. T., Witt, A. A., & Oh, D. (2010). The effect of mindfulness based therapy on anxiety and depression: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 78, 169–183.
5. Keng, S. L., Smoski, M. J., & Robins, C. J. (2011). Effects of mindfulness on psychological health: A review of empirical studies. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 31, 1041–1056.
6. Öst, L. G. (2008). Efficacy of the third wave of behavioral therapies: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 46, 296–321.
7. Goldstein, E. (2015). *Uncovering Happiness: Overcoming Depression with Mindfulness and Self-Compassion*. Atria Books: USA.



S.A.F.E. Self-Compassion Practice

Instructions

Instruct the client to follow these steps:

Step 1: Soften into the Feeling. (S)

Breathe in and acknowledge the feeling that is there

Step into the place between stimulus and response by giving it an emotional name

Step 2: Allow/accept it to be as it is (without resisting it or clinging to it). (A)

Breathe in and out, acknowledging that the feeling is there.

Ask yourself: "Can I allow this feeling to be as it is?"

Step 3: Feel into the emotion with a kind attention. Uncover your need. (F)

See it as an opportunity to deepen your awareness and to investigate the feeling.

Send a sense of love or kindness to the feeling and notice where in your body you feel it, its size and shape or even if it has a colour. You may even choose to put your hand where you feel it - on your heart, your stomach etc.

Ask:

- What does this feeling believe? (Does it believe you are unlovable, unworthy?)
- What does this feeling need right now? (Does it need to feel cared for, to feel secure, to feel a sense of belonging?)

Then plant your answer as a seed in yourself, personal to whatever your need is, as a wish for yourself:

"May I feel loved"

"May I feel safe and secure"

"May I be free from this fear"

"May I feel a sense of belonging" etc.

If you feel any resistance to the process, simply recognize it as such. Afford it the same curiosity, caring and friendly awareness as the underlying emotion.



Step 4: Expand awareness to all people struggling with it. (E)

Understand you share this experience with the rest of humanity. Everybody suffers and makes mistakes. Take what you have learned from the previous F and send it outward saying:

“May we all feel loved”

“May we all feel safe and secure” etc.