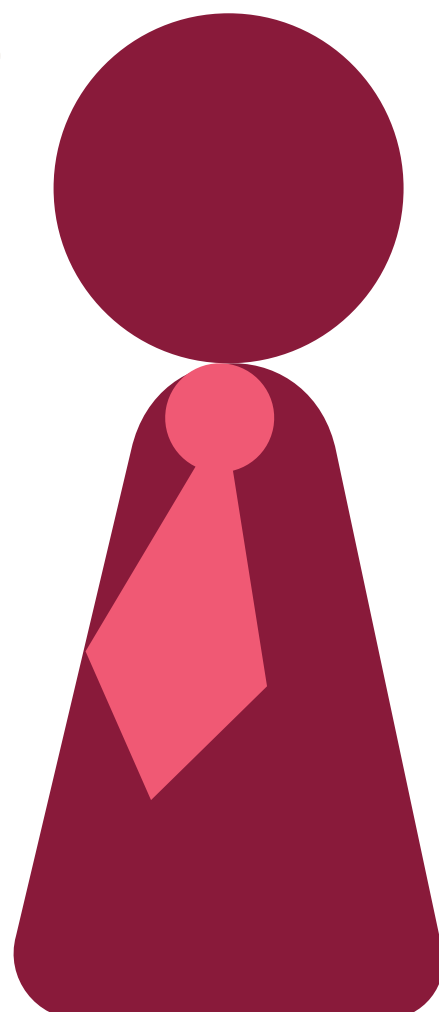




# Mindfulness Self-Help Series: Compassion Practice

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for anxiety and depression

**Mindfulness is the practice of paying deliberate attention to the present moment. This can help us be more 'aware' of our moments, less distracted by our minds and more accepting of our experience.**

Compassion is another word for kindness. It is seen as an important value in all mindfulness traditions. This self-help leaflet is about how to develop compassion within meditation and more generally in our attitude towards ourselves. We will break this down into 3 ways mindfulness can help us practice compassion.

**Learning new skills:**

**It's not uncommon for people to struggle with self-kindness; perhaps finding it a confusing or difficult concept. If this is the case for you, it might be helpful to think of compassion as just another life skill. Although it may feel tricky to begin with, as with any skill: the more you practice, the easier it will become.**

## **Mindfulness Helps us to Practice Compassion by:**

### **1. Being Kinder Towards Ourselves**

As with the other mindfulness values and attitudes, we learn compassion because of its potential to help us cope with the present moment. For example, if we tend to be overly self-critical towards ourselves (the opposite of compassion) we will likely find it harder to cope when faced with difficulty: as not only do we have the tough situation to deal with but also our own self-criticism.

We sometimes forget that the way we speak to ourselves can affect our mood and self-confidence. To understand this better, imagine speaking to a friend about a problem. Consider how you would feel if they responded with criticism and judgement, compared to how you would feel if they showed you kindness and support? We can use meditation to notice when we are being self-critical and to find kinder ways of relating to ourselves.

All meditation involves an element of paying attention to thoughts as they arise. After noting the presence of thoughts, we try to let them go, treating them as simply 'mental events' of the mind and of no consequence. Yet, as you get familiar with this process, you may notice that certain types of thoughts are harder to let go of. In these cases, it can be helpful to note the general quality of the thought i.e. "noticing planning", "observing worrying" etc. This tends to give you greater insight into your overall state of mind in that moment, which in turn helps you to respond wisely.

Similarly, if self-critical thoughts arise, you can categorise them in the same way, perhaps noting to yourself "critical thoughts are arising" before letting them go as best you can. As with all mindfulness practices, you don't need to get into an argument with difficult thoughts, or even to 'try' to change them. This is more about a process of becoming aware of when you are caught in unhelpful thought patterns, such as self-criticism.

It may be hard at first for us to see how much of our suffering comes from our own thoughts. Yet this insight is valuable as it paves the way for greater 'choice' in our responses. As such, when we notice critical thoughts; instead of getting frustrated, we can acknowledge the difficulty of the experience from a place of self-compassion. The antidote to critical thoughts is not to get into a struggle with them, but to commit to being gentle, attentive and accepting towards yourself, so that compassion can take the heat out of them.

**Remember not to criticise yourself for having critical thoughts! It can be difficult to change the habits of a lifetime. If you are finding it hard to cope with persistent self-criticism; then it may be helpful to speak to a mental health clinician about how to access support for this. (Many people find mindfulness is easier after they've learnt coping strategies for negative thinking).**

## **2. Developing Better 'Self-Care'**

As well as being kind to ourselves in terms of our thoughts, we can also become kinder in terms of our daily routines and behaviour. This might be as simple as remembering to take regular breaks from tasks, or attending to our relationships with others, or making sure we have some leisure time. It is also about recognising our own needs and limitations in life, and bringing wisdom into our actions, such as knowing when to say no or ask for support.

Often, we find that those who struggle the most with 'self-care' are those with a tendency to focus on meeting other people's needs at the expense of their own. Whilst it's a nice thing to be kind to others, the first step is to be kind to oneself. This allows our kindness to others to arise from a sense of inner nourishment rather than self-neglect. Trying to be kind to the world when we are not treating ourselves with kindness will inevitably leave us feeling exhausted and depleted by our efforts. If you tend to feel this way, maybe take a moment to consider if you have forgotten the first step in compassion: self-kindness.

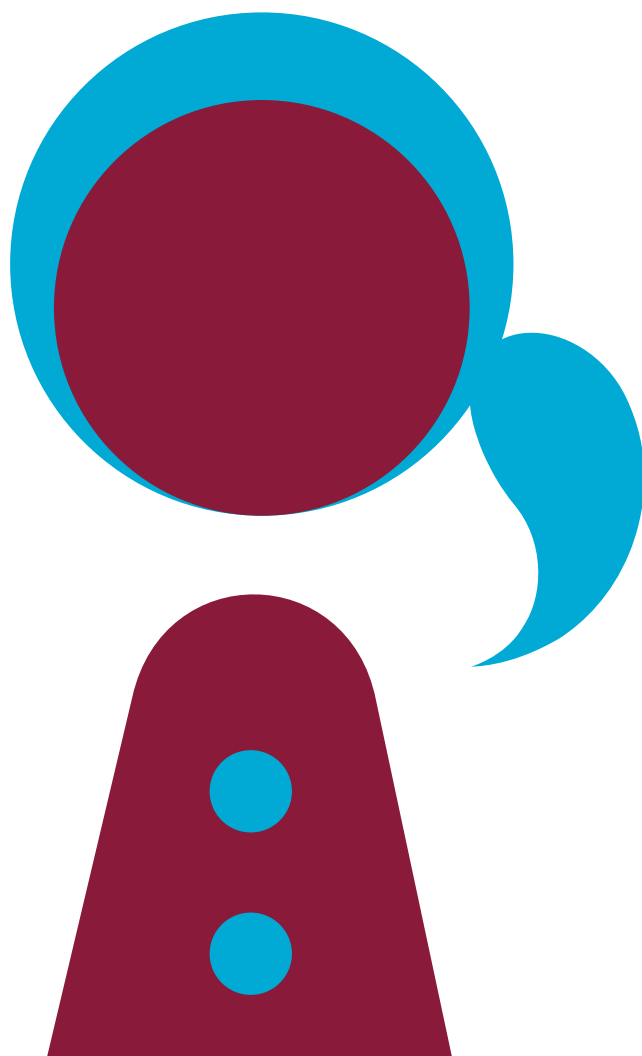
## **3. The Middle Way of Mindfulness**

Our third approach to kindness is through seeing the world in a way that allows us to be compassionate. Sometimes, our inner attitudes towards the world and ourselves make it more difficult to be kind. For example, a tendency to 'strive for perfection' can leave us prone to the types of issues discussed above, such as self-criticism or neglecting our needs.

Perfectionism sometimes comes from a mistaken belief that we are only of value if we are perfect in some way. Sadly, this is a way of thinking that can leave us trapped: forever cycling between striving for perfection; and then becoming self-critical when we can't achieve or maintain such impossibly high standards. If you recognise this, you may also have found yourself rather prone to over-exertion or feeling very driven when it comes to your goals: it can feel as though we are not 'allowed' to have any limits or make mistakes. This inevitably becomes an exhausting and anxiety provoking way to live.

'The Middle Way of Mindfulness' can help us with this tendency, as it teaches us not to get lost in the extremes of either seeking perfection or becoming self-critical when we can't achieve this. The middle way is one of embracing some degree of 'imperfection' and recognising that this is a shared human experience.

Even with all the difficulty of life, when we stop criticising ourselves or expecting perfection, we might find a greater sense of ease with how things really are. A helpful phrase to reflect upon is "good enough is good enough" as this teaches us to value ourselves even when we have limitations. It is often the case, that the only person who expects us to be 'perfect' is our own self. If this sounds familiar to you, you may want to consider what embracing 'good enough' would feel like for you on a day to day basis? It's important to remember that just by the virtue of being a person and your own unique self, there is already more right than wrong with you.



## **Suggestions for Self-Compassion:**

You can practice compassionate both in formal meditation and the moments of your wider life. You might want to take a few moments every day to practice some of the below ideas.

- **Try repeating a kindly phrase to yourself such as: “I’m okay” or “I’m doing the best I can” or “I am good enough”.**
- **Imagine what you would say to a good friend if they asked you for help? Can you bring a similar sense of ‘friendliness’ towards yourself?**
- **Focusing on the region of your heart; can you imagine it softening, perhaps even pumping out warmth and care into your whole being.**
- **Following the breath with mindful awareness; and imagining that this natural flow is breathing compassion throughout the body.**


## **The Compassion Generator**

On our website we have an audio file called the ‘Compassion Generator’ meditation which is free to listen to and download. It is designed to help you connect to yourself with kindness and acceptance. You may find it helpful to listen to the audio a few times to get familiar with the approach and then, when you are ready, you could also try it without the guidance. As your compassionate practice develops you may come to find the kindly phrases ‘arise’ whenever you need them.

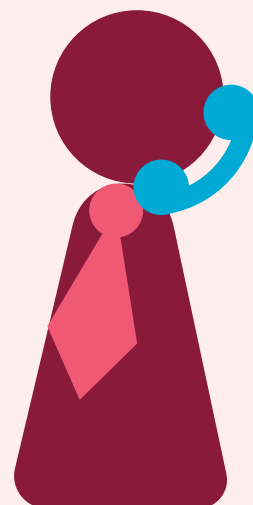


If you would like to find out more about compassionate practice, please also see our Mindful Living course which goes into more detail about this. This can be accessed via the Wellbeing Service Website: [www.wellbeingnands.co.uk/norfolk/get-support/mindful-living/](http://www.wellbeingnands.co.uk/norfolk/get-support/mindful-living/)

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*We work together to deliver a range of support interventions for people ages 16 and over with low mood, anxiety and depression. For more information about who we are see: [wellbeingnands.co.uk](https://wellbeingnands.co.uk)*

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