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Self-Compassion

September 2017

Beginning

- *Thought experiment:* You have forgotten your car keys and have to go back to your house. Write three things you would say to yourself. Hear the words, notice the tone.
- No one becomes a **Chaplain or spiritual leader** without expecting a lot of themselves.
- **Sometimes we fail** (as you may have noticed). We can become disappointed in ourselves. Perfectly normal in our hyper-competitive society.
- It is easy to **judge ourselves** harshly (more than we would others).

The Self-esteem Trap

- Self-esteem is usually based on **performance**. How much do we need the wins?
- Do I need to be **better-than-average** (or outstanding) to feel good about myself? Can we all be better than average – in everything? C.f., My childhood sporting ‘talent’.
- **Unhealthy** consequences: looking for someone to blame or bully. Or other extreme is narcissistic and holding myself as better than others.
- Need **better basis** than contingent self-esteem for that all important relationship to self.
- **Best reason to practice self-compassion** is that it is available and relevant **WHEN WE FAIL!**

Automatic Self-criticism?

- 3rd wave CBT includes Self-compassion Therapy, but I will focus more on how it applies to us first.
- As we know from my experience as a psychologist is that negative thoughts easily become **automatic**. Present, active but not noticed. And have tone!
- So we need to recognize this *about ourselves*, and come up with an intentional response.
- What steps are necessary if we are to *stop being hard* on ourselves?
- Self-C Scale www.self-compassion.org

Compassion

- Growing **interest in compassion**
- **Tibetan monk** who was held in jail for years by Chinese prison guards. Later he was released and had an audience with the Dalai Lama. He was asked about his time in prison and the monk said he faced danger a few times. The Dalai Lama asked “What danger?” The monk replied, “Of losing compassion towards the Chinese.”
- **In the West** we tend to see compassion as a gift, so bestowing it on ourselves seems selfish or self-indulgent.
- **In the East**, with a rich meditative tradition, as seen compassion as a skill to be cultivated (Salzberg in Germer, 2009).
- Can we learn to be self-compassionate: To recognize that we are hurting. Then to **hold ourselves kindly and gently** (Harris, 2011).
- Or forgive ourselves?

Kristen Neff

www.self-compassion.org

Three principles (or doorways) to SC:

- (a) **Self-kindness versus self-judgment**, not like the movie *Fight Club* (1999). Identify the words we say to ourselves.
- (b) **Feelings of common humanity versus isolation**. Why me? This is an isolating question. The alternative is to see our experience as part of the human experience (fallen?).
- (c) **Mindfulness versus over identification** Self-compassion encourages the balance of holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness, rather than avoiding or being overly fused with them (Neff, et al., 2007). Try saying something like: **soften, soothe, allow**.

Obviously the first step is to recognize we are hurting.

Illustration: Discovered an ex-patient did a murder.

To Practice

- *To Do:* Take a phrase that you commonly say to yourself with sting. Change the tone of the **inner voice**. Can you hear it speaking softly and lovingly to you? Or subvert by saying in 'pirate voice'.
- List some **self-compassion phrases** to say to yourself. I am OK just as I am, etc.
- **Suggest** some now? Memorize them or write on a card for future use.
- **Thought diffusion** from ACT, sky-write the phrase and watch the words break up.
- Try **soften, soothe, allow**.

When the Inner Critic is too strong

- Unfortunately self-compassion may have its limits as a therapy. If you have a **history of trauma, abuse or neglect** as a child. The actor Jack Nicholson once said, “My mother never saw the irony in calling me a son of a bitch.”
- The self-loathing of Borderline PD.
- Need a stronger therapy in **Schema Therapy**, which distinguishes the two parental modes:
 - (a) **Demanding Parent** This internalized voice is never satisfied with escalating demands and high expectations, “You need to achieve...”
 - (b) **Punitive Parent** is a harsh voice. It speaks with condemnation and dismissive put-downs such as “You are worthless, bad, evil ...”
- Dialectical Behaviour Therapy is another option.
- Di Francesco, Roediger & Stevens (2015) *Schema Therapy for Couples*, Wiley or Gitta Jacobs et al. (2015) *Breaking Negative Thought Patterns* Wiley.

Clinical Practice

- We routinely put **our needs aside** to focus on people in ministry who are needy and self-absorbed. Sound familiar?
- This is an unequal relationship.
- It is natural that we feel **resentment even hatred**. This was observed by D. W. **Winnicott** in his paper (1949) "Hate in the C-Tx".
- Hating people is **unacceptable**, so we feel shame and end up alienated from ourselves.
- Self-Compassion is a good step to **turn this around!**
- Also W's idea of a "**good enough mother**" which can be applied as "good enough chaplain/minister".

Exercise: Journal with Self-Compassion

- Take 10 minutes to write about events from the last week or two.
- But rather than just report, write with self-compassion. Try the three principles of SC of Neff and express self-understanding in what you report.
- After you have written a page or so, share what it was like with someone near you.

The Self-compassionate Chaplain

- SC is **not positive thinking** or an ideal to fall short of. But the benefits of SC include:
- Leads to greater **empathy**, less compassion fatigue, and is a good stepping stone to forgiving ourselves when we 'really screw up'.
- Acknowledging pain leads to **better self-care** including taking holidays when needed.
- Curiously when **we accept ourselves** we are more willing to change. So we grow as leaders and people
- **Theologically** God deals with us through grace, why do we treat ourselves differently? Do we know ourselves better than God does?

Concluding thoughts

- What 'one thing' will you take from today?
Share with someone near you.
- Visualization to conclude.
- B. Stevens, (2016) *Emotional Learning: The way we are wired for intimacy* (free eBook)
- THANKS
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