Self-Compassion and Pain Management

What is self-compassion?

Self-compassion is a tool that you can use to improve your well-being, your self-confidence, and your resilience. It's one that we need to pay a lot more attention to in the world of pain care.

Most people report it being easier to be compassionate to others, but harder to turn a kind and caring understanding to their own experiences of suffering. It can take time to develop, and just deciding to read this information is an act of self-compassion – a commitment to learning skills that will promote your own wellbeing.

Self-compassion is similar to having compassion for others. First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. If you ignore that homeless person on the street, you can't feel compassion for how difficult his or her experience is. Second, compassion involves feeling moved by others' suffering so that your heart responds to their pain (compassion literally means to "suffer with"). When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly. Finally, when you feel compassion for another (rather than just pity), it means that you recognise that suffering, failure, and imperfection is part of the shared human experience. "There but for fortune go I."

Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself when you are having a difficult time, fail, or notice something you don't like about yourself. Instead of just ignoring your pain with a "stiff upper lip" mentality, you stop to tell yourself "this is really difficult right now," how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment?

Why is self-compassion important?

Self-compassion can bring great benefits for our mental health and well-being. Although it can seem like selfishness to some, being self-compassionate can help place you in a better position to meet not only your own needs but those of others as well. Like on an airplane when the oxygen masks come down, you need to put your own mask on (ensure your needs are met) before you can help others to get their masks on.

We all have three systems called the threat, the drive and the self-soothing system that are responsible for managing our emotions. Each system has different functions, feelings and generates different thoughts. These systems can become unbalanced then our suffering can increase.

Particularly, self-compassion can activate our soothe system, which calms our threat system (the system responsible for detecting potential dangers in order to protect ourselves) and our drive system (the system that spurs us on to get things done and be active in life). This is important, as without our soothe

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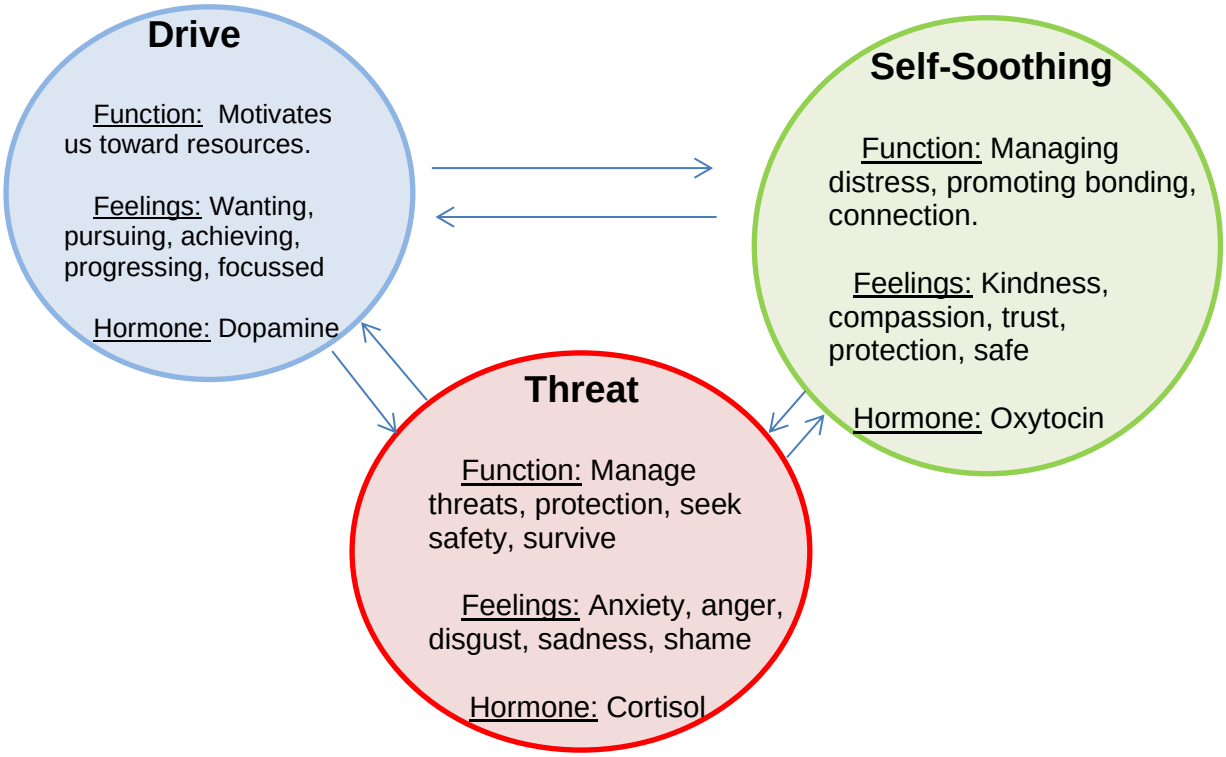
system, our threat and drive systems become overactive and can lead to difficult emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression.



As example individuals with chronic pain may experience greater sense of threat related to fear of losing work, being seen as lazy or otherwise judged negatively, or even fear of being a burden to others.

They may also have increased drive and push themselves to get everything done on a 'good' day, increase a boom/bust cycle of activity, or even use self-criticism as motivation. Some drive is a good thing, but when out of balance with the other systems it can lead to burnout and lack of motivation.

Often skills in soothing, and access to soothing connections are decreased when chronic pain is present. It is harder to get out seeing friends; a sense of being disbelieved can make trusting others trickier and it can be harder to prioritise when you have a limited amount of energy each day.

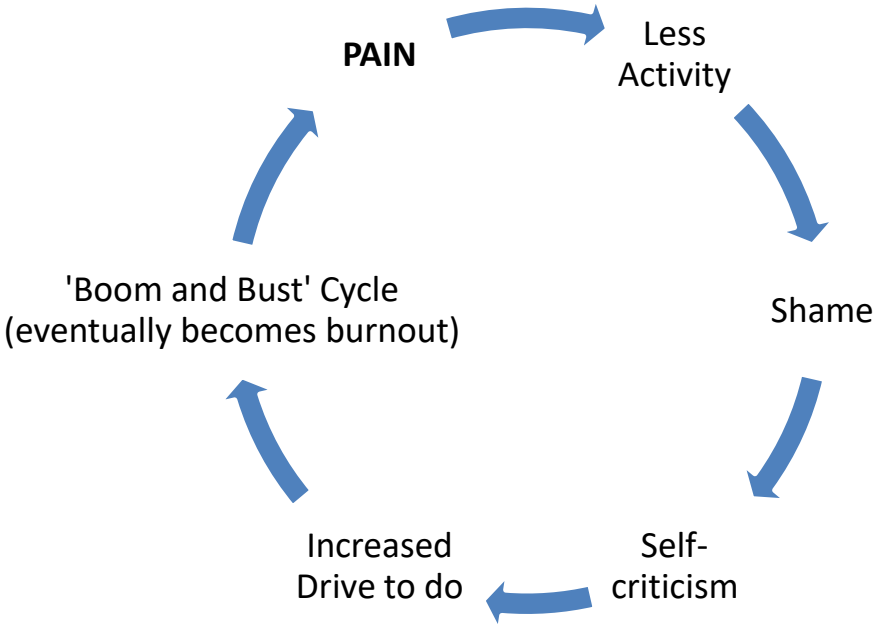
You did not choose the families or circumstances you were born into, the resources and experiences available to you, nor did you choose the way your brain works. Our brains are designed to detect threats rather than promote soothing, and so an (over-)active threat system is not your fault.

How does this relate to chronic or persistent pain?

Often individuals living with chronic pain can have a heightened sense of threat, through no fault of their own, both from their pain experience and

sometimes from past experiences. Individuals can struggle with a sense of shame at the change in their physical abilities, which can turn into self-criticism. This can then increase the motivation to do everything on a 'good day' despite knowing that this will make pain worse over the following days. Instead of taking a compassionate approach to their pain, as they would advise a friend to do, they can start to push through pain, or withdraw entirely from activity.

Self-compassion does not mean that you are not still going to do everything you can to improve your situation. Instead of resisting what is, you are just working with what is, comforting and being there, supporting yourself while you're coping. This gives you the peace of mind and that sense of connectedness, and should help you make better choices.



Self-criticism (e.g. fear of being seen as lazy) can often drive us push through pain, to try and do everything on a 'good' day. This can lead into a 'boom and bust' cycle where we are then unable to do very much for the following days, ultimately increasing overall levels of pain. Developing self-compassion can help to break this cycle.

A study by Edwards et al (2019) of 339 people seeking treatment for chronic pain came to the conclusion that self-compassionate people show higher acceptance of pain, greater psychological well-being, tend to see themselves and others in more positive ways, are less burdened by stress, and adjust better to physical limitations. Likewise, studies that directly address chronic pain suggested that self-compassion is correlated with higher levels of emotional resilience and positive mood, and lower levels of depression, pain catastrophizing and pain-related disability

How to develop self-compassion

There are many different ways to develop self-compassion. It is a gradual process – start with one task at a time before adding anything else.

The building blocks of self-compassion:

1. Acknowledging pain – both physical and psychological, without becoming focussed on it to the exclusion of other experiences. We can only bring compassion to experiences we are aware of. Make contact with your experience in the present moment and be open to what is there, including unpleasant experiences and sensations. This is the basis of mindfulness. This is different to what people often do when they are in pain, which is to try to avoid or suppress it. Supressing negative experiences can be like holding a beach ball under the water, eventually you will tire of this, and the ball will bounce back with an equal force to that used in supressing it.

2. Learning to step back from self-judgements. Our minds are often quick to judge and criticise ourselves (and others). An essential aspect of self-compassion is to learn to step back from this. We can't switch it off but we can get better at noticing when we're doing it, naming that story, and learn strategies to "unhook" ourselves from such thoughts.

3. Acting with kindness. There are many ways in which we can act more kindly towards ourselves and others. There is a list of ways to practice this at the end but you might have others you could add to this list.

4. Validation. Sometimes we don't acknowledge our emotional or physical pain as a valid experience. Our minds tell us that we shouldn't feel like this, we shouldn't react like this; we should be able to handle it better, etc. This type of harsh, invalidating attitude is the very opposite of kindness. Instead we can remind ourselves that we often do not get to choose what happens to us in our lives and it is normal and natural for humans to have painful thoughts and feelings when life is difficult.

5. Connectedness. Emotions such as fear, shame, guilt, and the harsh inner self-talk that comes with these can make us feel cut-off from others and that we are not good enough. The problem here is not that we have such thoughts and emotions; the problem is that we believe them. Connecting with others can help us to challenge, or even just ignore, these thoughts.

Resources:

- The Compassionate Mind Foundation website has a page of online resources which include things such as compassionate letter writing, building a compassionate image, and developing qualities of inner compassion (https://compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/exercises)

- Mindfulness practice in general is helpful, although there are also specific mindfulness exercises aimed at developing greater compassion for self and others, e.g. the Breathworks website has

a series of kindness meditations that you can buy and download (www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk). There is also a compassionate breath meditation on the Free Mindfulness Project website (http://www.freemindfulness.org/download)

- There is a useful book called Mindfulness for Health by Vidyamala Burch and Danny Penman. All of the meditations (designed for individuals with chronic pain), including a compassion based one, included in the book are also available as audio recordings for free on https://soundcloud.com/hachetteaudiouk/sets/mindfulness-meditation/s-chcYB

Ways to be kinder to ourselves:

- Talk to ourselves in a gentle way, much as we would speak to a loved one or a frightened puppy.
- Ask yourself, "What would I do if this was a friend?"
- Use compassionate imagery. This can be an internal source of soothing to help us feel calm and relaxed. There are some mindfulness practices that include this which can be found on the Compassionate Mind website.
- Use kind self-touch such as placing a hand gently on top of a painful area, or applying some hand cream and giving our hands a massage.
- Do kind deeds for ourselves or others.
- Spend quality time with people who treat us well. If it is not possible to see them, can you call? Or even making that connection to others by writing a postcard or looking at old photos.
- A simple self-soothing exercise is to use a smell that gives you a sense of well-being (essential oils, candles, clothing of a loved one, your pet, etc). Our sense of smell bypasses the logical brain and taps straight into the areas of the brain connected with emotion; therefore it can quickly help you access feelings of being calm.

The evidence base for self-compassion in pain management

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