An Introduction to Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT)

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Workshop Outline

• Introduction to the model
• Psychoeducation – ideas about how and why we suffer
• What is compassion?
• Can we develop or cultivate compassion?
• What are the different flows of compassion?
• Brief experiential practice

Compassion begins with a reality check

1. Evolution has shaped us - we are an emergent, species in the ‘flow of life’ so our brains, with their motives, emotions and competencies are products of evolution, designed to function in certain ways

2. We are biological, gene built creatures - our lives are short (25,000-30,000 days), decay and end, and are subject to various malfunctions and diseases – in a genetic lottery. Everything changes – the nature of impermanence – the nature of tragedy

3. We are socially shaped - the social circumstances of our lives, over which we have limited control, have major implications for the kinds of minds we have, the kind of person we become, the values we endorse, and the lives we live
The brain itself is our biggest challenge!!!

New Brain
Imagine, Plan, Worry, Ruminate, Theory of Mind, Self-monitor

Old Brain
Motives (harm-avoidance, food, sex, caring, status)
Emotions (anger, anxiety, sadness, joy)
Behaviours (fight, flight, shut down, caring)
Emotion

level

Time

New Brain – Sometimes Unhelpful

Old brain

New brain

Imagining

worst

outcome

Self-

criticising

New Brain – Sometimes Unhelpful

Old brain

New brain

Ruminating

Self-

criticising

Exercise

Get in to pairs

Discuss the concept of ‘old brain – new brain’

What ‘old brain – new brain’ loops do you/your clients typically get in to?

New Brain

Imagination, Plan, Worry, Ruminating, Mentalization, Self-monitor

Old Brain

Motives (food, sex, relationship seeking, caring, status)

Emotions (anger, anxiety, sadness, joy)

Behaviours (fight, flight, shut down, submission)

Bringing Compassion:

What might help?
What Helps? Mindfulness

Mindful Brain

↑ New Brain: Imagination, Planning, Rumination, ToM, Mentalisation

↓ Old Brain: Motives (food, sex, relationship seeking, caring, status), Emotions (anger, anxiety, sadness, joy), Behaviours (fight, flight, shut down etc)

Mindfulness

“Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”, Jon Kabat-Zinn

Holding the attitude of observant curiosity - with acceptance of what arises

Mindfulness – can help to understand the “nature of mind” by studying and observing it – but this also helps to understand “nature’s mind”

Mindful Compassion Brain

Mindful Brain

↑ New Brain: Imagination, Planning, Rumination, Integration, Self-Identity

↓ Old Brain: Emotions, Motives, Relationship Seeking, defensive behaviours

COMPASSION
Compassionate Motivation ‘shapes the mind’

Attention  Thinking  Reasoning
Imagery  Fantasy
Compassion  Behavior
Motivation  Emotions

How are our motives and emotions organised?

Motives evolved because they help animals to survive, seek out things that are important (e.g. food, shelter, relationships, status, reproduction etc) and leave genes behind.

Emotions guide us to our motivations/goals and respond if we are succeeding or threatened.

There are three types of emotion regulation systems:
1. Those that focus on threat and self-protection
2. Those that focus on doing and achieving
3. Those that focus on contentment and feeling safe

Types of Emotion Regulation Systems

Drive, Excite, Vitality
Incentive/resource-focused
Wanting, pursuing, achieving, consuming
Activating

Content, Safe, Soothed
Non-wanting/Affiliative focused
Safeness-kindsness
Soothing/Calming

Threat-focused
Protection and Safety-seeking
Activating and Inhibiting

Anger, Anxiety, Disgust
Types of Affect Regulator Systems

- Threat-focused
- Protection and Safety-seeking
- Activating/Inhibiting

Anger, anxiety, disgust
Emotion Regulation Systems:  
– ‘Three System’ Model

**Incentive/resource-focused**
Wanting, pursuing, achieving, consuming
Activating

**Threat-focused**
Protection and Safety-seeking
Activating/Inhibiting

**Anger, Anxiety, Disgust**

**Drive, Excite, Vitality**

**Lottery**

£$$£$$£$$
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Types of Emotion Regulation Systems

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Anger, Anxiety, Disgust

From dispersal and avoiding others...

Relationship between Threat and Soothing

Caring, sensitive, available, consistent 'other'
Types of Emotion Regulation Systems

- **Drive, Excite, Vitality**
  - Incentive/resource-focused
  - Wanting, pursuing, achieving, consuming
  - Activating

- **Content, Safe, Soothed**
  - Non-wanting/Affiliative focused
  - Safeness-kindness
  - Soothing/Calming

- **Threat-focused**
  - Protection and Safety-seeking
  - Activating and Inhibiting

Anger, Anxiety, Disgust

Exercise:

Get in to pairs

Discuss what experiences you/your clients have with each system

How are the three systems balanced for us at times?
Exercise: 
Soothing Breathing Rhythm and Soothing System Imagery

Facilitating and developing frontal cortex functions
- Notice
- Mindful Reflection
- Acceptance
- Empathy
- Mentalise
- Reframe
- Regulate
- Builds/Facilitates
- Affiliative/Soothing
- Threat

Threat can inhibit our compassionate minds
- Anger
- Critical Blaming
- Uncompassionate Uncaring Unsupportive
- Mindless Worry
- Ruminations
- Self-Criticism
- Judgemental Impulsive
- Non-reflective
- Threat
So, basic philosophy is that...
We all just find ourselves here with a brain, emotions and sense of (socially made) self we did not choose but have to figure out
Life is difficult - involves dealing with tragedies (threats, losses, diseases, decay, death) and people do the best they can
All in the same boat – different genes/experiences could have led to different ‘version’ of ‘me’
Much of what goes on in our minds is not of ‘our design’ and not our fault – our experiences sensitise our old brain/threat system and new brain (e.g. self-criticism/rumination) leading to distress and suffering
Evolution has made our brains highly sensitive to kindness, and neuroscience is revealing that there are specific brain areas focused on detecting and responding to kindness and compassion
It can be helpful to try and train our minds to learn how to cope with this distress and suffering – the wisdom to not blame but a desire to take responsibility – cultivating compassion for ourselves

Compassion

from the Latin come - with
+ pati to bear, suffer
What is Compassion?

Compassion definition:
a sensitivity to the suffering of self and others (and its causes) with a commitment to try to relieve it and prevent it.

From CFT perspective, compassion linked to two very different psychologies, which we aim to develop:
(1) the ability to understand, approach and engage with suffering and distress – COURAGE.
(2) The desire and motivation to alleviate suffering, uproot its causes and seek to prevent suffering in the future – DEDICATION & WISDOM.

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Anger, Anxiety, Disgust

Where does compassion sit?

Drive System

Soothing/Affiliative System

Compassionate Self

Threat System
Compassionate Mind - Engagement

**Attributes**
- Sensitivity
- Sympathy
- Care for well-being
- Distress tolerance
- Non-Judgement
- Empathy

Compassion

Skills developed via therapy interventions

**Attention:** On what is/was helpful and what is needed – movable, ‘zoom in’ and ‘zoom out’ perspective

**Feelings:** Cultivation of loving kindness, warmth, open affiliation, patience, slowing

**Reasoning:** Evidence, alternatives and ‘not my fault’ understanding

**Behaviour:** Commitment to practice, effort, courage – action

**Imagery:** Different forms (based on memory, or creating ‘fantasy’ image) bringing into mind, using to integrate

**Sensory:** Breathing, body posture, voice tones, Yoga
The Science of Compassion

Research

Mood/Mental Health/Treatment
CFT – effectiveness of therapy – depression, PTSD, ED, psychosis

Physiological/Biological
Practice of imagining compassion for others produces changes in frontal cortex & immune system (Pace et al, 2009)

Emotions
Loving-kindness meditation (compassion directed to self, others, & strangers) increases positive emotions (Frederickson et al, 2008)
Self-compassion associated with significantly lower levels of depression and anxiety symptoms, along with shame & anger (Gilbert, 2005; Neff et al, 2007)

Thinking
- Self-compassion and self-criticism r = -.65** (Neff, 2003)
- Self-compassion and rumination r = -.50** (Neff, 2003)
- Self-compassion and worry r = -.62*** (Raes, 2010)

Behaviour
Breines & Chen (2012) found self-compassion group, in comparison to self-esteem group, had:
• greater motivation to make amends for a moral transgression
• more time studying for a difficult test following an initial failure
• greater motivation to change a perceived weakness

Condon et al (2013) – mindfulness & compassion meditators 5x more likely to direct compassion to a stranger in need than control group

Relationships
Neff and Beretvas (2012)
• people high in SC reported by partners to be more caring, higher in acceptance and allow greater autonomy
• those low in SC reported as more detached, domineering, controlling and verbally aggressive
• higher SC linked to greater relationship satisfaction
Developing a Compassionate Mind
Training: Imagery

Compassion as Flow
Different practices for each
Self → Other
Other → Self
Self → Self

Flow of Compassion
Compassion from Another
Creating a Compassionate Other

Act of creating an ideal compassionate other (what one would like for oneself) can be an important step in cultivating a compassionate mind.

Helps to spend some time finding the type of image and form of relationship that fits for you – images often change.

This can be an Inner: Nurturer, Guide, Friend, Mentor, Fellow Traveller; Bodhisattva - Ideal Compassionate Other

Consider what key qualities are important to you that your ICO has.

Developing Compassion Images

Ideal caring and compassionate image - define ideal as everything you would want or need.

Caring as a genuine desire for one’s well-being – commitment and motivation to be helpful and supportive.

Wisdom a sentient mind who understands the struggles of humanity and of you. Empathic stance, wise and non-blaming – understands we have a ‘tricky brain’

Strength as ‘calm authority’ fortitude, endurance, complete benevolence – strong and courageous

Exercise:

Creating your Ideal Compassionate Other
Flow of Compassion

Self  ➔  Other

Developing the Compassionate Self

Why try and create a ‘compassionate self’?

Evidence that imagining & practicing of a particular ‘self’ shapes the mind

Practicing Compassionate Self associated with increase in compassion & positive emotion, self-criticism, depression and stress (Matos & Gilbert, submitted)

Practicing ‘best possible self’ and relating to difficulties from this associated with increased ability to cope and optimism (e.g. Meevissen et al., 2011; Peters et al., 2010)

Increases motivation to engage in difficulties (Breines & Chen, 2012; Condon et al., 2013)

Linked to physiological benefits (Weng, 2013; Pace et al 2009)

Compassionate goals linked to increase in feelings of closeness, increased trust and social support over duration of semester – a ‘supportive environment’ (e.g. Crocker & Canivezzo, 2008)
Unique qualities of the compassionate self

Caring Commitment arises from seeing clearly into the nature of suffering and cultivating a heartfelt wish to alleviate suffering and conditions that give rise to suffering – desire to be supportive and helpful.

Wisdom – arises from insight into the non-personal nature of the flow of life. How our genes and social conditions shape us – give rise to our inner experience. We don’t choose much of what goes on in our mind – but take responsibility for what we can.

Strength and a sense of inner confidence and authority that arises from body grounding, inner stilling and wisdom.

Exercise:

Creating your Ideal Compassionate Self

Other-Focused from the Compassionate Self

Sit comfortably in chair with soothing breathing rhythm. Work on getting into the compassionate self. Now imagine focusing on the ‘heartfelt wish for somebody you love to be happy and at peace’ (this can later extend outwards to eventually all beings).

Use the mantra on the out breath “May you find peace; may you be happy.”

Have a focus start work on the joy if this could be true

Notice any blocks, resistances or fears that emerge (i.e. look out for threat system)
Flow of Compassion

Self ➞ Self (self-compassion)

Expressing Self Compassion – Different Ways

- Attention
- Thinking
- Reasoning
- Imagery
- Fantasy
- Self-Compassion
- Behaviour
- Motivation
- Emotions

Exercise:
Directing your Compassionate Self
Self-Compassion
Self-Focused from the Compassionate Self

Sit comfortably in chair with soothing breathing rhythm. Work on getting into the compassion self. Now imagine focusing on your own desire to be happy. Use the mantra on the out breath “May I find peace; may I be happy.” Sometimes it helps to use your name.

Have a focus on the joy - if this could be true.

Explore people’s experience - reflection/meditation and fears, blocks and resistances.

Some therapy ‘interventions’ (with a CFT twist!)

- Compassionate letter writing
- Compassionate thought forms
- Compassionate chair work
- Compassionate voice tones
- Behavioural experiments (via CS)
- Gratitude focusing
- Joyfulness focusing
- Taking an interest in others & working for their benefit
- Acts of kindness

Care For Well-Being: What Do You Wish to Be?

Don’t worry if can’t get the ‘feeling’ - the wish (desire, motivation, intention) comes first, and then the feeling.

There is a story attributed to Native American wisdom, that links nicely to how we might ‘see’ different parts of us:

One evening a grandfather was teaching his young grandson about the internal battle that each person faces. “There are two wolves struggling inside each of us,” the old man said. “One wolf is vengeful, angry, resentful, self-pitying and scared... the other wolf is compassionate, faithful, hopeful, and caring...”

The grandson sat, thinking, then asked: “Which wolf wins, Grandfather?”

His grandfather replied, “The one you feed.”
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