



Building Self-Compassion

Module 5

Self-Compassionate Thinking

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Introduction

Ideally you have been practicing your compassionate image, and when you slow your breathing down and bring this image to mind you notice it triggers a shift in how you are feeling. You may notice some warmth within, and feelings of calm, kindness and strength start to arise. So, now what?

Essentially by using your breathing and compassionate image you can shift gears and activate the soothe system and calm the threat system whenever you need to. We now want to take this a step further, and deliberately allow these compassionate feelings to influence the way you think about any difficult situation you find yourself in. This module will take you through two ways that you can do this (i.e., *Compassionate Thought Diaries* and *Compassionate Letter Writing*), showing you how to purposely bring a compassionate perspective or mindset to any specific struggle you face.

We will also finish this module by considering how you can train your attention in a manner that is a bit different to what you have already done in Module 3. That is, how you can train your attention to generally appreciate the positives in life. This can be a nice counterbalance to the threat system that is always on the lookout for the negatives, and hence might help us to spend more time in soothe mode.

The Thought-Feeling Connection



What you think, and the thoughts that go through your mind, are very important in determining how you feel. Stop for a moment and think: when you are feeling good, what sorts of thoughts roam around in your head? Conversely, when you are feeling bad, what sorts of thoughts are you having?

It makes sense to most people when we say that:

*It is not the situation you are in that determines how you feel,
but the thoughts, meanings, and interpretations you bring to that situation.*

Here is an example of what we mean. Imagine you are told that you will have a pop quiz on Monday. Below are three different ways of thinking about this same situation and the different emotions, behaviours, and physical sensations that would result from thinking in these different ways.

Example event: <i>Being told I have a pop quiz</i>			
	Emotions	Behaviour	Physical
<p><u>Thought 1</u> <i>I love quizzes! I know this stuff quite well so I think I'll do fine.</i></p>	Happy	<i>Do a bit of revision</i>	<i>Quite relaxed</i>
<p><u>Thought 2</u> <i>I am useless at quizzes. I am such an idiot. I don't know anything, I am going to fail for sure.</i></p>	Anxious Sad	<i>Try to study hard, but can't concentrate, give up, don't get much done</i>	<i>Sick in stomach Tense</i>
<p><u>Thought 3</u> <i>So what? I don't care. This subject isn't important anyway.</i></p>	Neutral	<i>Do no study</i>	<i>Quite relaxed</i>

Can you see how what we think can be so important in determining how we feel emotionally and physically, and can influence what we do?

We have already discussed in Module 1 how self-critical thinking about any situation can leave us feeling a variety of uncomfortable emotions like anxiety, sadness, depression, guilt, shame or anger. Thought 2 (“*I am useless at quizzes. I am such an idiot. I don’t know anything, I am going to fail for sure*”) is an example of what self-criticism can do to us, showing how it generates difficult emotions, and can lead to unhelpful behaviours and uncomfortable physical sensations too.

As we have said previously, with self-critical thinking, our internal self-talk is highly negative, disparaging and berating. The content of self-critical thoughts can be very cruel, but also the tone of our internal voice when we speak to ourselves is usually very cold, harsh, and attacking.

Now remembering the idea that *how we think largely determines how we feel*, then one way to lift uncomfortable emotions is to change the way we are thinking. This means that you don’t just accept your self-critical thoughts as true, but instead use your breathing and compassionate image to shift your mindset into self-compassion gear. Once you are in this more helpful gear, start to question the way you are thinking and see if you can’t bring a more compassionate perspective to the situation. Doing this can then have a positive impact on how you are feeling.

Compassionate Thought Diaries

We would like to introduce you to a *Compassionate Thought Diary* to guide you in developing more self-compassionate ways of thinking. If this way of thinking is new to you, then following a step-by-step guide can be useful. Even if you are familiar with this approach, putting pen to paper can free your mind, making it less cluttered so you are able to think more clearly and compassionately.



On page 6 is an example of how to complete a thought diary, and following that is a blank copy for you to practice on. The diary guides you through how to put your self-critical thoughts out on paper, and how to bring a more compassionate perspective to whatever you are dealing with.

The diary will first ask you to write down information about your **Self-Critical Thinking**. For example:

- **What is the trigger?** The trigger can be a specific situation you are experiencing, or just thinking about something like a memory of the past or thinking about something in the future, or it could be a current emotion or physical sensation you are experiencing. The trigger is whatever you are struggling with.
- **What is the self-critical part of me saying?** This is where you list all the unhelpful or negative thoughts that might be running through your mind about the trigger. A number of these are likely to be unkind thoughts directed towards yourself.
- **What tone of voice is it using?** This acknowledges that it isn’t just what we say to ourselves that can be hurtful, but the way we say it. The tone of our internal voice is important to recognise, because it has an effect on how we feel.
- **How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts?** Rate the strength of your belief between 0 and 100%. That is, how convincing the self-critical thoughts seem to you.

- What emotion(s) am I feeling? And rate the intensity of the main emotion you are experiencing, between 0 and 100%.
- What physical sensations or behaviours go with these feelings? This recognises that our thoughts don't just affect our emotions, but our physical feelings and what we do too.

This section of the diary will just help you to become more aware of how you are thinking and feeling. At this point nothing changes, we just have more clarity about what is going on for us, and hence are in a better position to meet this struggle with some self-compassion.

The next part of the diary will be about shifting perspective and injecting some **Compassionate Thinking** into the mix. To do this, you must first call upon your *Slow Breathing* and *Compassionate Image*. Once doing this has helped to activate the soothe system and calm the threat system, you will be in a much better frame of mind to bring a compassionate perspective to whatever you are dealing with. There are a number of questions listed in the diary to help you entertain more compassionate thinking. You don't necessarily have to use all the questions, but sometime the more options you have the better. Also, you may find that you answer a number of questions with the same sorts of ideas. This is not a problem, as repetition can be a good thing, especially when we are retraining our mind to think in more compassionate ways.

So with compassionate feelings of warmth, kindness, wisdom, and strength elicited within you, you can then ask yourself the following:

- What does my compassionate image have to say about this? If your compassionate image is your own fantasy creation of an ultimate compassionate being, what would it say to you about the problem you are struggling with? If instead your compassionate image involves imagining giving compassion to another person, then what would this side of yourself that can give such abundant compassion, have to say to you about your current difficulty?
- What advice would I give to a friend I deeply care about who was thinking and feeling this way? We have already seen how compassionate we can be to others. This question can help us draw out our compassionate side that we tend to reserve for others, and bring it to bear on our own difficulties.
- What does the compassionate part of me want to say to the self-critical part? This is about giving voice to the compassionate side of you that may have been sidelined for too long. The compassionate side may recognise that the self-critical part might just be scared and is only trying to help, but is misguided and cruel and only leads to misery.
- What are some other ways of viewing this situation that might be more realistic, kinder or more helpful to me? This question is about tapping into compassionate thinking as being more balanced, reasonable, and wise in the advice it gives. Rather than hot headed and irrational as self-criticism can often be.
- How will I feel about this in 1 week, or 1 month or 1 year? (If it won't matter much then, can I let go of it now?) This question can sometimes bring some new balanced perspective about the true importance of what we are dealing with.
- What can I do to cope and look after myself now? A compassionate response is always geared at taking care of someone who is struggling, so it is important to shift our energy to doing this for ourselves, recognising the ways we can cope and the ways we can look after ourselves when we feel vulnerable as a way of rebuilding our strength.

With all of these new compassionate ideas and thoughts available to us, the last step of the diary is to consider what new **Compassionate Conclusion** we might develop. Before making a conclusion, it is important to re-read all the compassionate thoughts you put down on paper, and be conscious of how you are reading these to yourself. Ensure you haven't slipped from the warm and caring voice tone that goes with your compassionate image. If you have lost it momentarily, again just refocus on your slow breathing and compassionate image to kick-start your self-compassion mode again.

Having read through your compassionate thoughts then consider:

- What is a more compassionate and helpful conclusion to replace the self-criticism?
- How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts now? Re-rate 0-100%
- How intense is my initial main emotion now? Re-rate 0-100%

If you follow through with this strategy, it is likely that you will experience a decrease in your belief in the original self-critical thoughts and a decrease in the intensity of your original emotional reactions. If it has been useful in this way, then great, you can put your concerns to rest.

If instead you are still struggling, there are two things that can be helpful. Firstly, keep engaging your slow breathing and compassionate image, and re-reading the more compassionate thoughts to yourself. Bringing a compassionate perspective to things will be new and foreign to you, and may require quite a bit of practice to get used to. Also, focus your energy on the question: *what can I do to cope and look after myself now?* Whatever you came up with as helpful ideas in this regard, make sure you are putting them into practice now. If you aren't able to change your thinking on a struggle you are facing, then taking care of yourself is the most important place to channel your attention and energy.

Compassionate Thought Diary (Example)

Self-Critical Thinking

<p>What is the trigger? (i.e., a situation, thought - memory of past or thinking about future, emotion, physical sensation)</p> <p><i>Feeling anxious about an upcoming work presentation</i></p>		
<p>What is the self-critical part of me saying?</p> <p><i>What is wrong with me? I am so useless and pathetic. I am going to stuff everything up. Other people do presentations all the time with no problem. I am just so anxious and weak. Get it together or I will lose my job.</i></p>	<p>What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate intensity of main emotion 0-100%)</p> <p><i>Anxious (90%)</i></p> <p><i>Angry</i></p>	<p>What physical sensations or behaviours go with these feelings?</p> <p><i>Tense, butterflies, hot</i></p> <p><i>Plan to call in sick to work</i></p>
<p>What tone of voice is it using?</p> <p><i>Aggressive, shouty</i></p>	<p>How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts (0-100%)?</p> <p><i>90%</i></p>	

Compassionate Thinking

<p>Slow Breathing and bring my Compassionate Image to mind, allowing compassionate feelings to arise, then...</p>
<p>What does my compassionate image have to say about this?</p> <p><i>This sounds really hard. I am sorry you are having to go through this. You are not alone. Everyone feels anxious at times. These are normal feelings. Just focus on what you need to do</i></p>
<p>What advice would I give to a friend I deeply care about who was thinking and feeling this way?</p> <p><i>It is ok. Everyone gets anxious about presentations. You are not alone in that. You can do this. It is just a presentation that will be over in a flash.</i></p>
<p>What does the compassionate part of me want to say to the self-critical part?</p> <p><i>I know you are just scared for me and trying to prepare me for the worst and push me harder, but you just make me more anxious and this doesn't help me to focus so I can do my best</i></p>
<p>What are some other ways of viewing this situation that might be more realistic, kinder or more helpful to me?</p> <p><i>I have done presentations before and they have mostly gone well. Even if it didn't go well, I won't lose my job over one presentation. I am valued for many other things I do at work.</i></p>
<p>How will I feel about this in 1 week, or 1 month, or 1 year? (If it won't matter much then, can I let go of it now)?</p> <p><i>I may still think about this in a week, but probably not in a month and definitely not in a year. Maybe it isn't as important in the big scheme of things.</i></p>
<p>What can I do to cope and look after myself now?</p> <p><i>I can focus on preparing my slides for the presentation, plus go and do something relaxing and fun to give myself a break from constantly thinking about this</i></p>

Compassionate Conclusion

<p>Re-read my compassionate thoughts, making sure I am using a compassionate tone of voice when I do this</p>	
<p>What is a more compassionate and helpful conclusion to replace the self-criticism?</p> <p><i>It is ok and normal to feel anxious. Balance my time between preparing and relaxing. It will probably go well. And who cares in a month anyway!</i></p>	
<p>How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts now (0-100%)</p> <p><i>30%</i></p>	<p>How intense is my initial main emotion now (0-100%)</p> <p><i>50%</i></p>

Compassionate Thought Diary

Self-Critical Thinking

What is the trigger? (i.e., a situation, thought - memory of past or thinking about future, emotion, physical sensation)	
What is the self-critical part of me saying?	What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate intensity of main emotion 0-100%)
What tone of voice is it using?	What physical sensations or behaviours go with these feelings?
How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts (0-100%)?	

Compassionate Thinking

Slow Breathing and bring my Compassionate Image to mind, allowing compassionate feelings to arise, then...
What does my compassionate image have to say about this?
What advice would I give to a friend I deeply care about who was thinking and feeling this way?
What does the compassionate part of me want to say to the self-critical part?
What are some other ways of viewing this situation that might be more realistic, kinder or more helpful to me?
How will I feel about this in 1 week, or 1 month, or 1 year? (If it won't matter much then, can I let go of it now)?
What can I do to cope and look after myself now?

Compassionate Conclusion

Re-read my compassionate thoughts, making sure I am using a compassionate tone of voice when I do this	
What is a more compassionate and helpful conclusion to replace the self-criticism?	
How much do I believe the self-critical thoughts now (0-100%)	How intense is my initial main emotion now (0-100%)

Building Self-Compassion

Compassionate Letter Writing

A slightly different method of encouraging compassionate thinking when we are struggling with a problem, is by writing a compassionate letter to ourselves. This is really just a different way of doing the same thing that we did in our compassionate thought diary. That is, shifting our perspective from one that is self-critical to one that is self-compassionate. You may find you prefer compassionate letter writing to using the compassionate thought diary, or vice versa. Everyone is different. It is a good idea to try both on for size and see which one seems to be more effective for you.



To help with writing a compassionate letter to yourself, follow the suggested prompts below to guide you through the process.

The first step is to decide what the problem is that you are struggling with, which will become the focus of the letter. This is essentially the same as the trigger from your thought diary and can therefore be a difficult situation, thinking about a difficult past memory or some worries you have about the future, or a current uncomfortable emotion or physical sensation you might be struggling with. Once you know what the topic of your letter is, the next step is to use your Slow Breathing and Compassionate Image to shift yourself into self-compassion mode. Once this is achieved and you feel compassionate feelings arise within you, then you are ready to write a letter to yourself.

Really try to take the same stance you would if you were writing a deeply caring and kind letter to a friend who was having the same problem. If you notice yourself shift from this self-compassionate stance back into self-critical mode at any point while you are writing, just pause the letter writing, and use your *Slow Breathing* and *Compassionate Image* again, and then proceed with the letter writing once you feel you can approach it again from a compassionate mindset.

So, if you want to hand write the letter, get out a blank piece of paper, maybe even some beautiful writing paper if you have it. If typing it up on your computer, tablet or phone is more your style, then do that. Either way, use the following prompts to get you started with your writing. Feel free to change the prompts as you see fit, they are only suggestions, and you can write as much or as little as you like for each prompt. Remember you are writing this letter to yourself, and trying to bring a caring and kind perspective to whatever the problem is.

Dear.....[yourself]

I am writing to you because I understand that it is really hard for you at the moment. I know you are struggling with[the problem/trigger]

I am sorry you have to go through this.....

I hope you know that it is ok to feel....

I hope you know that everyone experiences.....

Human beings are imperfect and we all struggle, so I hope you know you are not alone in this.....

I am wondering if you have thought about...[add any helpful perspectives about the problem]

I really want your struggle to get easier. To help you feel better, address the problem and move on from it, I am wondering if it would help to.....[add any behaviours that might bring comfort or help solve the problem].

[Add anything else that needs to be said]

Please know I care about you and am here for you whenever you need.

Wishing you well,

...[sign off as yourself]

Below is an example to give you a feel for what compassionate letter writing might sound like. But remember, there is no right or wrong as long as you are approaching writing the letter with a deeply caring and non-judgemental mindset in place.

Dear Lisa,

I am writing to you because I understand that it is really hard for you at the moment. I know you are struggling with this work presentation that is coming up on Monday, and I know you are feeling really anxious about this. I am sorry you have to go through this and I want to help you get through it.

I hope you know that it is ok to feel anxious about the presentation. I hope you know that everyone experiences anxiety about all sorts of things in life, and anxiety about doing presentations is really common and normal. Human beings are imperfect and we all struggle, so I hope you know you are not alone in this. Many people have struggled with this sort of anxiety and many people will again. People do understand, even if this understanding is unspoken.

I am wondering if you have thought about all the positives that you have going for you that you might be forgetting. You have done presentations before and they have usually gone well. I can't think of one that went really badly. Even if it wasn't the greatest presentation, it will be over in a flash and will probably stand out more in your mind than anyone else's. Others will move on from it really quickly to the next thing, so you should feel free to do that too. You don't need to hold onto it. And just remember all the things you are valued for at work. One presentation doesn't change that.

I really want your struggle to get easier. To help you feel better, address the problem and move on from it, I am wondering if it would help to take some chill out time for yourself. Do something really relaxing and enjoyable like watching a movie or taking a bath. You deserve a break from all this. Then when you are feeling a bit refreshed, just focus on preparing your presentation one small step at a time. I know you can do that, remember that you have done it before.

Please know I care about you and am here for you whenever you need.

Wishing you well,

Lisa

Appreciating the Positives

Compassionate Thought Diaries and *Compassionate Letter Writing* are both about bringing compassionate thinking to the forefront when we are dealing with a specific issue that is troubling us and is generating emotional pain.

However, we can also foster compassionate thinking more broadly when we are not struggling with a specific situation, by training our mind to see, appreciate, and savour the positives in life. This is something that should be done regularly. Just like if you were training your muscles you would exercise them regularly, so if you want to train your attention to appreciate the positives, then your attention needs regular exercise in doing this.

There are two ways you can train your attention to appreciate the positives.

The first is through building on your *Mundane Task Focusing* from *Module 3*. This is about doing all the same things with your attention that were recommended for mundane task focusing (i.e., becoming aware of all the sensory aspects of the task at hand – touch, sight, sound, smell, or taste – and redirecting your attention back to these when your mind inevitably wanders). However, now we want to purposely choose pleasurable rather than mundane tasks as your focus (e.g., taking a bath, walking in nice scenery, eating a delicious meal, showing physical affection, listening to music, laughing, swimming, putting moisturiser on, etc.).

Now, what we find pleasurable in life will be different for each of us. This is about taking the small pleasures available to us in daily life, and not ignoring them, but maxing out our attention on these so we really appreciate them and all the sensory experiences that go with them. I guess we could call it **Pleasure Task Focusing**. List some of the common pleasurable tasks that you do, that from now on you can immerse your full attention in.

The second way of training our attention is by noting the positives that happen in daily life. This involves on a daily basis noticing acts of kindness by others, appreciating the small things others might do for us that we can often take for granted, and noticing any nice or positive things that happen. Remember the threat system is always on the lookout for the negatives, so noticing the positives can be a good counterbalance to this bias we all have. People often say “if it’s not written down, then it didn’t happen”. This is certainly the case when it comes to our attention. To retrain our attention we have to almost force it to look at the good stuff, so writing it down or keeping an **Appreciation Logbook** is a good way to force our attention to sit up and take notice.

People usually get a nice pad or notebook to be their **Appreciation Logbook**, and the most common place people keep it is on their bedside table. Then at the end of each day before going to bed, they record at minimum one thing they appreciated from the day (e.g., a meal their partner made for them, a work colleague offering to buy them a coffee, someone standing up for them on the bus, someone giving way to them in traffic, receiving a compliment, a beautiful sunny day, etc.).



As with all things recommended throughout these modules, try *Pleasure Task Focusing* and the *Appreciation Logbook* on for size, and be curious about the impact over time that regularly appreciating the positives can have on your general outlook on life. This is not about pretending that bad or negative stuff doesn’t happen, but instead allowing some of the good stuff to filter through too.

Module Summary

- How we think can be so important in determining how we feel emotionally and physically, and can influence what we do. Self-critical thinking will tend to generate difficult emotions, and can lead to unhelpful behaviours and uncomfortable physical sensations too.
- Rather than just accept self-critical thoughts as true, instead use your breathing and compassionate image to shift your mindset into self-compassion gear, and once you are in this more helpful gear, you are then in a good position to start thinking in more compassionate ways. Doing this can then have a positive impact on how you are feeling.
- There are two ways to bring a more compassionate perspective and tone to the way you are thinking about a specific problem: 1) Compassionate Thought Diaries, and 2) Compassionate Letter Writing. Both are different methods of achieving the same thing, that is, a kinder, more balanced, and helpful perspective on whatever is troubling you in life.
- Appreciating the positives more generally in day to day life can be a great way to nurture a more compassionate way of seeing the world. Pleasure Task Focusing and an Appreciation Logbook done on a daily basis can help you with this.



Coming up next ...

In Module 6, we will look at how to use your new found compassionate feelings to influence how you behave...

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Compassion Focused Therapy, which is an extension of and adjunct to Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy. These modules particularly draw on the work of Paul Gilbert and Kristen Neff.

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These are some of the professional references that informed the development of modules in this information package.

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