

Module: Bringing Compassion to the table

Module in Communication Skills for Supervisors

Why focus on compassion?

There is a growing body of evidence that compassion makes a difference to patients' experience of healthcare services and can aid recovery from illness¹. Being compassionate can also have a positive effect on healthcare professionals and can support people to deal with the types of stressors that can lead to burnout, loss of motivation and morale².

The Royal College of Psychiatrists suggests that compassion can '*improve staff efficiency by enhancing cooperation between individual and teams and between patients and healthcare professionals*'³.

So rather than a nice to have, being able to experience and demonstrate compassion can make a real difference to a doctor's life and work.

What is compassion?

Dr Alys Cole-King and Professor Paul Gilbert define compassion as '*a sensitivity to the distress of self and others with a commitment to try to do something about it and prevent it.*' They suggest that it is more than being kind or warm, although it includes these traits.⁴

Professor Paul Gilbert, a Consultant Clinical Psychologist, has created a model of compassion called the 'compassionate mind' approach, which can be used to support people and organisations to develop a focus on compassion. He suggests that as humans our capacity for compassion is based on two types of attributes – those required to sensitively engage with and understand the suffering of others, and those required to be able to do something about it, namely:

- **Motivation** – to be caring and supportive.
- **Sensitivity** – to be able to notice and give attention to others when they need help.
- **Sympathy** – the emotional ability to be moved by another's distress.
- **Distress Tolerance** – the ability to be with both ourselves and others in their distress without feeling overwhelmed or wanting to move away or shut it down.
- **Empathy** – our ability to recognise and make sense of the feelings and emotions of others.
- **Non-judgement** – involves not judging another for their pain or distress, not condemning it, being able to accept and validate the experience of another.⁵

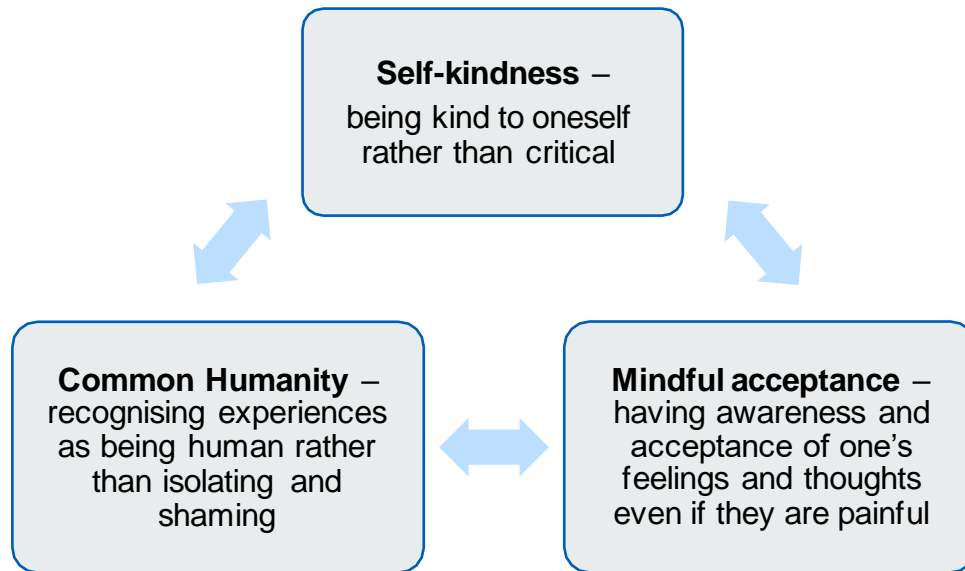
How to bring compassion to the table – for self and others

As humans we tend to be tough on ourselves and although it might sound 'too soft' to some, self-compassion can have beneficial effects on overall wellbeing and enhance someone's ability to be compassionate with others.

Bringing Compassion to the table

When we attend to our own wellbeing, we are more likely to be able to have capacity to support others at times when they are struggling.

A pioneer in the field of self-compassion research, Kirstin Neff identifies the following three components of self-compassion⁶:



Trainer exercise 1 – developing self-compassion

1. Think of a recent event which you have criticised yourself for or have felt guilty or regretful about it.
2. How do you feel?
3. What have you been saying to yourself about yourself in relation to this event?
4. What could be a kinder thing to think or say to yourself about this event?
5. If you knew that everyone says or does things they regret at times, what difference could that make to you?
6. How could you bring some acceptance to your feelings about this situation or event?
7. How can you accept that what has happened has happened?
8. How do you feel now?

Trainer exercise 2 – developing self-compassion

1. Think of one step you could take this week to enhance your overall wellbeing.
2. Think about and check what support systems you have in place for when you need them, such as peer support groups, reflective spaces, trusted friends, colleagues, partners, family members or others.
3. If necessary, take one step towards putting support in place.
4. Do one thing this week that represents being kind to yourself.

Bringing Compassion to the table

How to bring compassion to the table – with trainees

If a trainee is struggling or is being particularly challenging, it may be that there is something going on in their life or work which is causing high levels of stress and anxiety. This might also not be the case, but the trainee may benefit from a compassionate approach.

A trainee may be less likely to seek support if they feel they might be judged or that it might impact their training or progression.

Key skills have been listed in this worksheet, as well as those from other worksheets, such as:

- Listening and giving full attention
- Open Questions
- Demonstrating empathy
- Non-judgement

The more trainers are able to model compassion, the more it will encourage trainees to develop a compassionate approach with patients and colleagues.

Trainer exercise 3

1. Think of a trainee who you have found challenging.
2. How could you bring a sense of compassion to your work with this trainee?
3. What would be different?
4. How would you or others know?
5. When could you put this into practice?

Compassionate leadership

Another area of focus which might be of interest is in the field of compassionate leadership. Professor Michael A West focuses on compassionate leadership and the difference this can make to health and social care. He suggests that compassionate leadership is by its nature inclusive and so creates cohesive, supportive teams who then go on to deliver high-quality care. He describes four key features of compassionate leadership:

Attending	giving our full attention to those we lead
Understanding	understanding the challenges they face
Empathising	bringing empathy and a sense of care to our interactions
Helping	helping and supporting people to be able to deliver high-quality compassionate care

Professor West emphasises the importance of listening and helping. He also emphasises that compassionate leadership begins with self-compassion⁷.

Trainer reflective exercise

1. Take some time to reflect on compassion and how it shows up in your work with trainees?
2. What is one way you could enhance the compassion you bring to your work with trainees?

Other worksheets & podcasts to look at in the module

- Starting with a blank sheet
- Growth Mindset: The Basics for tips on how to acknowledge effort, engagement and persistence rather than fixed traits.
- Start with what's working – Appreciative Inquiry
- Key Skills - Listening
- Key Skills - Open questions
- Podcasts on Listening and Open Questions

Further reading and resources

1. Find out more about self-compassion and research by Kirstin Neff at: <https://self-compassion.org>
2. Alys Cole-King, Paul Gilbert: *Compassionate Care. The Theory and the Reality*: Journal of Holistic Healthcare; Vol 8 Issue 3 Dec 2011. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/A-Cole-King/publication/285810818_Compassionate_care_the_theory_and_reality/links/5758076408aef6cbe3626da1/Compassionate-care-the-theory-and-reality.pdf
3. Compassion in Care: Ten things you can do to make a difference: Royal College of Psychiatrists. Faculty Report: FR /GAP/02; (2015) https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/members/faculties/general-adult-psychiatry/general-adult-fr-gap-02-compassionate-care.pdf?sfvrsn=e6852ee1_2
4. Caroline Elton, *Also Human – the inner lives of doctors*, Windmill Books. (2018)
5. Stephen Trzeciak & Anthony Mazzarelli; *Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence that Caring Makes a Difference*. Studer Group (2019)
6. Stephen Trzeciak TED Talk: *How 40 seconds of compassion could save a life*: https://www.ted.com/talks/stephen_trzeciak_healthcare_s_compassion_crisis_jan_2018 (Jan 2018):
7. Michael A West, *Compassionate Leadership: Sustaining Wisdom, Humanity and Presence in Health and Social Care* Paperback. The Swirling Leaf Press. (July 2021)
8. Michael A West, *Compassionate and Inclusive Leadership*: (October 2019) The King's Fund: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrPmMwg9X8s>