

## Module: Bringing Compassion to the table

### Module in Communication Skills for Trainees

#### Why focus on compassion?

There is a growing body of evidence that compassion makes a difference to patients' experience of healthcare services and can aide recovery from illness<sup>1</sup>. 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 morale<sup>2</sup>.

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*'<sup>3</sup>.

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

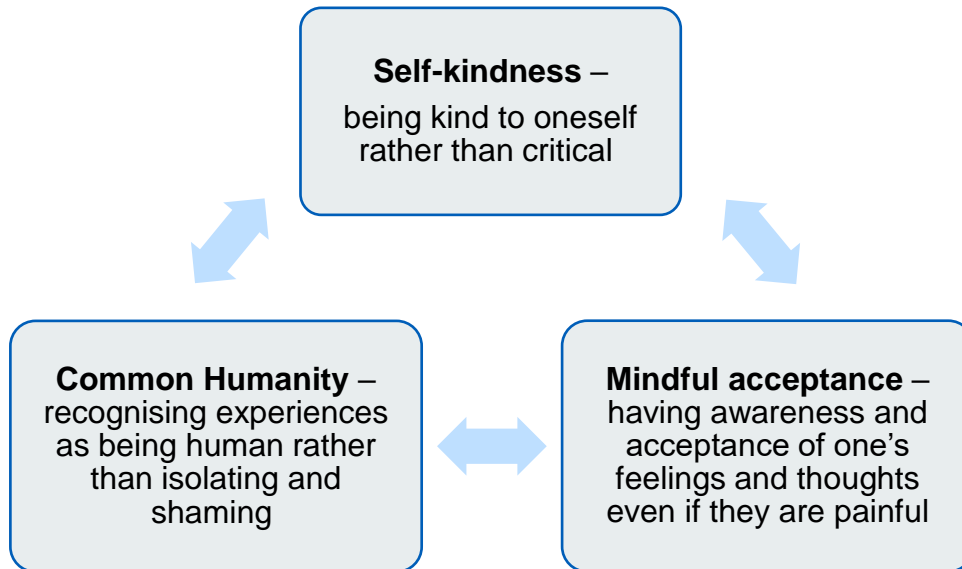
#### How to bring compassion to the table – for self and others

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

So as a trainee if you can attend to your own wellbeing, you 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-compassion<sup>6</sup>:



### Trainee 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?

### Trainee 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 – for patients

When you are faced with a patient or family member or friend of a patient who is being particularly challenging, it may be that there is something going on in their life which is causing high levels of stress and anxiety. This might also not be the case, but they may benefit from a compassionate approach.

Patients and families can find dealing with healthcare situations extremely stressful so it is worth bringing some compassion in if you can. Even if someone is not apparently struggling it is worth bearing this in mind.

Key skills to try are:

- Listening and giving them your full attention
- Demonstrating empathy
- Being non-judgemental

In many cases this can make a real difference to how people experience healthcare services and as mentioned at the beginning of this tool can also aide recovery from illness<sup>7</sup>.

## Compassionate leadership

Another area of focus which might be of interest is in the field of compassionate leadership. As a trainee you might not be in a leadership role yet, however, you might find it useful to be aware of this approach for the future.

Professor Michael A West is a pioneer in this area, focusing 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

<b>Attending</b>	giving our full attention to those we lead
<b>Understanding</b>	understanding the challenges that they face
<b>Empathising</b>	bringing empathy and a sense of care to our interactions
<b>Helping</b>	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-compassion<sup>7</sup>.

## Trainee reflective exercise

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

### 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](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](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/members/faculties/general-adult-psychiatry/general-adult-fr-gap-02-compassionate-care.pdf?sfvrsn=e6852ee1_2)The
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](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>