

Healing Shabbat Service Talk
Temple Shir Tikvah
May 4, 2018

I'm going to talk for a few minutes of this Healing Service about self-compassion.

The Dalai Lama was amazed to learn that a lot of Westerners don't like themselves, feel even self-loathing. We're so often critical or harshly judgmental of ourselves. He always thought people naturally love themselves. In the Tibetan language and in the classical languages the Buddha's teachings are written in, the word compassion implies compassion for oneself as well as for others. But apparently, in English, that's not the case, for many of us, anyway. So, the Dalai Lama felt English needed a new term, self-compassion.

So, what is it? Some hallmarks of self-compassion are being kind to yourself as opposed to criticizing yourself, feeling connected to others as opposed to isolated from others, and a moment-to-moment awareness of painful feelings instead of identifying with them. That is, being aware of painful feelings when they arise in the same way we're aware of sounds or sights, and not seeing the painful feelings as "me" or "mine."

But that's not always easy, just as feeling empathy or compassion towards ourselves isn't always easy. We have a natural self-compassion, which we see when we cut our finger, clean the wound and put a band aid on it to help it heal. But where does that go when we're hurting emotionally? When we hurt emotionally—for instance, when we lose what we had, or we don't get what we want, or we get what we don't want—we often try to not hurt. We try to think about something else, or we tell ourselves, "Don't feel that! Feel happy!" or we engage in some other version of pushing pain away. But as we've all experienced, resistance to pain can create even more suffering, starting with the battle going on inside you. Or maybe in reflecting on our lives—and reflection can be very useful—we get stuck in regret about the past or worry about the future, and then we try to suppress that, thus fueling more regret or worry. As one person said, "When you resist something, it goes to the basement and lifts weights."

An alternative, as many of you know from a practice you might have or have learned about, is to see things as they are, with acceptance, that is, mindfulness. Self-compassion is acceptance of the *person* that these things are happening to. We can jump-start acceptance and self-compassion when we stop trying to feel better, stop trying to control or manipulate our lives. And then the level of tension, at least, drops, like magic.

There are different practices that help us be mindful—see things as they are and accept them—but I'm going to just address the practice of self-compassion. It consists of saying phrases to yourself. You can have a self-compassion meditation practice, and sit or walk quietly for a period, repeating the phrases in your mind. Or

you can say one or more of the phrases at any moment, day or night, when something's bothering you, including at a moment when you're being hard on yourself. If you practice self-compassion as a medication practice—I had a typo here that says medication practice—that works! —if you practice self-compassion as a meditation practice, repeating the phrases in your mind, your mind will wander, because that's what minds do, jump around like monkeys, and when you realize it's wandered, you gently bring yourself back to the phrases. Or, as I said, you can at any moment, on an as-needed basis, say a phrase to yourself.

This is a highly portable, user-friendly practice. That's what it's about—self-friendliness. Talking to ourselves with the same care we would use if we were talking to a friend. Or you can invoke a different relationship in that sentence that works for you. One of my meditation teachers once said, “I married myself.”

I'm going to say several phrases you can use for self-compassion. You can cherry pick from them, or you can make up your own phrases that work for you. The phrases I'll give include phrases not only of self-compassion but also of loving kindness, forgiveness and equanimity, which are also self-compassionate. So I'll just read one after another, to give you an idea of them. You can use this as a moment of practice, or just hear the phrases as information about a practice. For some, it works to put your hand on your heart when you say a phrase, in a kind of a physical manifestation of caring for yourself.

So here are some phrases:

May I accept myself just as I am. May I care for myself with ease. May I be kind to myself. May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I be healthy and strong. May I be happy and calm. May I be free from suffering. This is a moment of suffering; suffering is a part of life. May I accept the circumstances of my life. Everyone is on her or his own life journey. I am not the cause of this person's suffering, nor is it entirely within my power to take it away. May I forgive myself for what I may have done, wittingly or unwittingly, that caused you harm. May I forgive you for what you have done, wittingly or unwittingly, that caused me harm.

Those are some phrases you can practice with. If you find yourself being harsh with yourself, criticizing or judging yourself, then you can say, for instance, May I hold this judgment with kindness and care.

You can have a Jewish self-compassion practice—and if you want more information about any of what I'm talking about, I'm happy to refer you to some, and there are several here tonight including Rabbi Cari and Beth who have references also. So, for instance, you can say, “May I show myself kindness/*chesed*. May I show myself compassion/*rachamim*. May I feel peace/*shalom*.” Or you might say a familiar prayer, which is also a prayer of self-compassion, “May God bless me and keep me. May God's presence shine on me and be gracious to me. May God's presence be with me and give me peace.”

There's been a lot of research about meditation, mindfulness, and self-compassion—more than 5,000 papers have been published in the last 10 years with hard data that show the benefits of these practices. Or maybe you've noticed on your own along the way something that makes sense to you about this practice, for instance, that it can be hard to empathize with other people if we reject in ourselves the feelings they're experiencing—despair, fear, failure, anger, shame. Or maybe you've noticed along the way that when we see something in ourselves we want to change, there's more can-do energy available to initiate that work of change when we're kind to ourselves in the process.

I'll close with this quote attributed to the Buddha, that sometimes lays to rest a doubt that can come up for people around self-compassion:

“You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserves your love and affection.”

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