

**Mitigating Compassion Fatigue**  
with Ashley Dahl, MSW, CMT-P of OpenSpace Mindfulness  
for NAEOP

**Definitions, Practices & Resources**

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**DEFINITIONS**

**Compassion**

Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” It’s more commonly understood as a feeling that arises when one is in the presence of another being’s suffering (or group of beings), and motivated to help alleviate that suffering.

**Compassion Fatigue**

*“Compassion fatigue is a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper.”* – Dr. Charles Figley, Tulane Traumatology Institute

**Compassion Satisfaction**

A state of feeling energized, happy and grateful to be making a difference.

**Fierce Compassion**

Engaging, upholding or demanding wholesome boundaries in response to the suffering of others.

**Fierce Self-Compassion**

Engaging, upholding or demanding wholesome boundaries in response to suffering being inflicted upon oneself.

**Self-Compassion** (an operational definition from [Kristin Neff, PhD](#))

1. **Mindfulness.** Self-compassion allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they arise. It involves noticing. It is a form of “balanced” awareness where we neither over identify with a feeling, nor run away.
2. **Common Humanity.** Self-compassion involves seeing ourselves as part of a larger human experience (vs. isolated.) Self-compassion helps us feel connected (vs. “*this shouldn’t be happening*”, “*there’s something wrong with me.*”)
3. **Kindness & Care.** Self-compassion means treating ourselves with kindness and care in the presence of suffering. It involves the motivation to do something about suffering. It is a form of active soothing.

# PRACTICES

## **Steady Earth Breathing**

Feel points of contact between your body and surfaces below. Begin to notice the presence of earth supporting and holding you. Can you allow your body to be completely held? Inhaling from feet upwards sense earth's qualities of steadiness, stability and strength being received into your body. Exhaling downwards and out of bottom of feet, allow your body to release what isn't needed in the moment (holding, tension, thought patterns, etc.) You may also begin by imagining setting down anything presently weighing you down, allow earth to hold it for you (with the option of picking it back up afterwards or leaving it with earth to compost.)

## **Soothing Self-Massage**

With whatever level of pressure feels good, take some time to enjoy a series of self-massage techniques.

1. Crown of head: place hands gently on top of head, allowing right and left fingers to meet at the crown, then brush hands downward along the sides and back of head.
2. Forehead: allow right and left fingers to meet in the center of forehead, drag fingers away in opposite direction towards temples.
3. Behind Ears: beginning with fingers just behind the tops of ears, pull fingers downward along the sides of your neck.
4. Across Chest: allow right and left fingers to meet in the center of your upper chest, drag fingers away in opposite direction towards armpits.
5. Over Thighs: place palms over thighs with heels of palms at you hip flexor, fingers pointing towards knees. Then brush your hands towards your knees.
6. Down Legs: Brush hands along the full length of legs from top to bottom, or from knees to feet, or whatever length of legs is comfortable for your body.

**Nurturing Breath** (Adapted, in part, from Kristin Neff's Affectionate Breathing practice) Without changing anything, rest awareness with your natural inhalations and exhalations. Explore releasing any effort, allow breath to breathe itself and abide with the corresponding moment-to-moment physical sensations. Then gently expand awareness to also notice the ways breath naturally nourishes you through in-breaths, naturally soothes you through out-breaths. With inhales, continue feeling sensations of nourishment and vitality. With exhales, continue feeling soothing sensations, calmness and releasing of what isn't needed.

**Compassionate Touch** (Adapted from work of Kristin Neff & Healing Touch Program) Choose a compassionate gesture (or explore several); spend a few moments or more abiding with sensations of warmth, gentle pressure and care. Gestures you might try: hand over heart, two hands over heart, one hand holding the other, holding opposite elbows or shoulders, gently cradling neck, and back of hand resting on a cheek. If your mind is fairly active consider one hand on forehead, one on heart or belly. To add an element of "fierce" to your compassion, consider making a fist with one hand, and covering that fist with an open palm.

### **Compassionate Mentor** (Adapted from Caverly Morgan)

Bring to mind a person or being that you understand to embody kindness and to be generous with their care. As you hold them in awareness, what do you notice and see? What do you feel in your body in their presence? If helpful, imagine them resting a hand on your shoulder or cheek. What sensations and feelings arise? You can engage a compassionate mentor as part of a regular mediation practice. You can also invite the caring presence of your mentor into difficult meetings and appointments, or times when you're hurting. If you're struggling to offer yourself kindness, imagine what your mentor would say, and the words and tone of voice they might use.

### **Self-Compassion Break** (Adapted from Kristin Neff)

Say to yourself:

1. This is a moment of suffering. (Or "This hurts" or "Ouch"...)
2. Suffering is a part of living. (Or "I'm not the only one who feels this way", "I'm not alone"...) )

Now draw upon your compassionate gesture. Maybe that means putting your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hands. And then say to yourself:

3. May I be kind to myself. (Or "May I proceed with kindness" or "May I be gentle with myself" ...)

*If you're having trouble finding the right language, or you feel like an imposter, it may help to imagine what you might say to a dear friend struggling with that same difficulty or imagine talking to your younger self. You might also enlist the support of a "Compassionate Mentor" (see above.)*

### **Compassion Satisfaction Care Plan**

Take a few moments to settle into your body, inviting an inward focus. You may want to spend a few breath cycles or more practicing Nurturing Breath. Then reflect upon the following questions: *What will be a part of my plan? What will I need to let go of, or push pause on, to fulfill this plan? What supports or structures will help me to implement this plan?* Afterwards, write key reminders and dates into your calendar.

# RESOURCES

## Articles & Books

- <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40596-021-01427-w> / "Behind the Masks: Experiences of Mental Health Practitioners of Color During the COVID-19 Pandemic."
- <https://www.mattieuricard.org> / Matthieu Ricard, Buddhist Monk & Humanitarian has two-part blog on "Empathy Fatigue".
- *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm and Confidence* by Rick Hanson, PhD.
- *Healing with Nature: Mindfulness and Somatic Practices to Heal from Trauma* by Rochelle Calvert, PhD.
- *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation Through Anger* by Lama Rod Owens.
- *Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* by Sharon Salzberg.
- *Making Peace with Your Mind: How Mindfulness and Compassion Can Free You From Your Inner Critic* by Mark Coleman.
- *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out* by Ruth King.
- *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* by Resmaa Menakem.
- *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* by Kristin Neff, PhD.
- *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions* by Christopher Germer, PhD.
- *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* by David A. Treleaven.
- *You Belong: A Call for Connection* by Sebene Selassie.

## Videos

- Kelly McGonigal on Why Self-Compassion Matters and How to Develop (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkZy2sd2nc>)
- Kristen Neff TEDTalk on Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTZBUSpir4>)
- Rick Hanson TEDTalk on Hardwiring Happiness (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpuDyGgleh0>)

## Websites

- <https://www.centerformsc.org> / Resources and training in self-compassion.
- <https://insighttimer.com/meditation-app> / Insight Timer, free meditation app
- <https://openspacemindfulness.com> / Ashley's website featuring guided meditations (recorded and written) as well as compassion-related resources and classes.
- <https://www.self-compassion.org> / Kristin Neff's website, filled with resources and practices (including an article on "Why Caregivers Need Self-Compassion").

**Have questions? Interested in additional resources?**

Feel free to email Ashley at [hello@openspacemindfulness.com](mailto:hello@openspacemindfulness.com).