



CENTER FOR
COMPASSIONATE
LEADERSHIP

FIVE PRACTICES



Practice: Note to a Dear Friend

How kind is that voice in your head, toward YOU? When you make a mistake, or are struggling in a situation, or something really tough is happening in your life, how do you speak to yourself?

Our innate tendency is to bring out the inner critic, full of negative energy. In more cases than not, the voice is not only critical of the immediate issue, but it drags us into a whole spiral of worries and woes, isolating us, and digging deep into the dark recesses of our being. What was once a survival mechanism is now an obstacle to our well-being.

Most of us don't even realize the inner critic is running our show, dictating how we respond to ourselves and to others. Fortunately, we can use self-compassion to shift into a more positive, loving, and connected state by learning to notice and then respond in a different way.

Whether you are new to compassion practices or an experienced practitioner, this is a short, simple, effective exercise that will offer you new awareness and a path towards self-kindness.

Time Commitment: 5 minutes

STEP ONE

Identify a difficult situation in your life – not too hard, not too light. Think of a recent situation that is challenging or disturbing. Pick something that is not a major disaster, nor a little molehill. Consider the situation and reflect on how it makes you feel. Notice if there is any response to these feelings in your body, in addition to what is going on in your mind.

STEP TWO

Write a note as if you were comforting a loved one or a dear friend who was facing the same difficult situation you identified in Step One. Write down what is in your heart and mind that you think would bring some comfort, consolation, or insight to your dear one.

STEP THREE

Add two words to the top of the note: "Dear [your own name]." Read the note out loud to yourself with loving kindness. Let the reading of the note soak into your inner being. See how it feels to receive the words of kindness and support.

Closing

Notice if the kinder voice in your "Note to Self" is consistent with the way you usually talk to yourself. The more you practice using this kind voice, the more you will retrain your inner voice, transforming your inner critic to becoming your inner friend.

Practice: Ready, Set, Go

Did you ever wish you had a reset button to change your mood or create an open mindset? This is a simple, effective tool that anyone can use, whether you are new to compassion practices or an experienced practitioner. You can engage in this personal reset practice in less than thirty seconds. It is patterned after a practice doctors and nurses rely on during the very brief time available moving from patient to patient.

Not only is the practice quick, but if you can remember the first letters of Ready, Set, Go, you've got the acronym for the practice's three steps: R S G.

There is no limit to the use of this practice. Use it as many times a day as you feel you have a need for a quick re-centering.

Time Commitment: 1 minute

STEP ONE

Ready?

Relax with a simple breath.

Breathe in, breathe out. Allow your breath to move consciously and slowly in and out of your body. If comfortable, breathe through your nose. With each exhale, allow any tension in your body to drop away, such as letting your shoulders relax and softening the muscles around your jaw and face. Also, focus on being present in the moment. Feel your feet on the ground. Take three conscious breaths.

This first step will calm your nervous system, reward you with self-compassion and kindness, and allow you to anchor into the present moment.

STEP TWO

Set.

Set a positive intention for what's next.

Now you can turn your attention and set a clear intention for what you hope to do next. Set a positive goal for yourself. It could be a behavioral goal: "I want to be open and receptive to what I am about to hear," or it could be an outcome goal: "I want us to leave our meeting with a clear understanding of what must be accomplished by Friday."

Whatever intention you set, it is valuable that it be positive and that it involve things that are within your control. You can't control other people's behaviors or reactions, so avoid having a goal focused on their behavior such as "I want my team member to remain calm when I express my concerns to them."

This second step invites a posture of compassion for others, and supports mutually beneficial results.

STEP THREE

Go!

Greater good focus.

You have a choice in every interaction to focus on what you share or on what separates you, how to cooperate or how to compete. Reminding ourselves that we have more in common than our differences makes working together more easeful and creates an environment of trust, psychological safety, and well-being. Sometimes this is easy because we are working with people who view things similarly to us. When that is the case, focusing on your shared goals is easy.

Other times, we face situations with others where we have many differences. At these times it is important to come back to our shared common humanity. We all want to be happy. We all want to be loved. We all want to be seen and heard. Taking a moment to compassionately recognize our common humanity can give us a starting point for working together cooperatively, rather than competitively.

Closing

When you're done, notice if you're feeling any shift to a more relaxed, open, collaborative mindset. And then repeat the practice before your next encounter, meeting, or patient.

Practice: Just Like Me

When we are triggered by a co-worker, boss, friend, stranger, or family member, we tend to think “they” are wrong, “they” are rude, “they” are uncaring, or “they” are mean. We tend to focus on the difference between “us” and “them,” which increases a sense of separation. However, instead of securing our survival as in ancient times, separation now leads to feelings of shame, blame, and isolation.

Yet, there is a more compassionate approach to dealing with the challenges that confront us every day. We find an antidote in recognizing our similarities, our common humanity, and connectedness. When we celebrate what we share as human beings, we open the door to empathy and compassion.

For starters, the more we perceive someone as similar to ourselves, the greater empathy we have for that person. Our enhanced empathy leads to more kindness and compassionate action toward that person. Research shows that we have the ability to grow our capacity for both empathy and compassion.

Once we welcome another as “just like us,” and wish them well, it reinforces a circle of empathy, compassion, and kindness.

This practice can be particularly useful in busy airports, traffic jams, work challenges, in leadership trainings, and to soften conflicts with friends and family. It’s as powerful with strangers as it is with spouses, and everyone in between, including yourself.

You are welcome to use the traditional phrases here, or feel free to adapt the phrases to the situation at hand, and make them your own.

Time Commitment : 2 – 10 minutes

STEP ONE

Sit quietly, if circumstances allow. Or perhaps you are on a crowded train. Wherever you may be, draw your attention inward. Breathe in and breathe out for several cycles of natural breath to help quiet and rest your mind. Ask your body to let go of any tension. Start to let a relaxed feeling cascade down from the top of your head, soften your face and jaw, release through the shoulders and belly, and move through your legs, the soles of your feet, and connect into the earth below.

STEP TWO

Bring someone into your field of attention, and see a picture of them in your mind’s eye. Or maybe they are sitting right in front of you :) Acknowledge that they are simply human, just like you.

STEP THREE

Repeat any number of phrases, while at the same time thinking of the person. Pause at the end of each phrase to reflect and remember we are *all human*.

This person was born into this world, just like me.
This person has a body and mind, just like me.
This person has experienced suffering, just like me.
This person has been sad, angry, or hurt, just like me.
This person is sometimes scared and worried, just like me.
This person wants to be loved and understood, just like me.
This person wants to be seen and heard, just like me.
This person wants to be safe and healthy, just like me.
This person wants to belong, just like me.
This person wants to be happy, just like me.

Next, we wish them well, even if it feels hard to do, so that we can cultivate the feeling of lovingkindness. Wishing well to others often inspires us to feel even better about ourselves.

I wish for this person to be free from pain and suffering.
I wish for this person to be safe from harm.
I wish for this person to have health and wellbeing.
I wish for this person to move through life with ease.
I wish for this person to be happy.
Because this person is a fellow human being, just like me.

Closing

Take another few rounds of natural breath, sitting with the new awareness that you have just cultivated. Enjoy the fruits of your practice.

Practice: Lovingkindness

Loving-kindness is a core practice for developing Compassionate Leadership. It's foundational for developing a compassionate stance toward ourselves, toward people we like and also those we dislike, and for the greater whole of all beings. Lovingkindness gives us an opportunity to strengthen our "compassion muscle," and cultivate a positive response to our natural negative internal and external biases.

Multiple studies have researched the benefits of Lovingkindness Meditation, over long and short periods of time. As you might imagine, it reduces our feeling of stress and anxiety. Additionally it can reduce inflammation, reduce depressive and chronic pain symptoms, improve resilience, bolster self-acceptance, increase social connectedness, support a wide range of positive emotions including love, joy, and gratitude, and even slow the aging process. Bottom line, we feel better towards ourselves and towards others.

Taking up a daily practice of Lovingkindness can reap enormous benefits, even if just for a few minutes a day. Research shows that a regular and longer practice will deliver more powerful results for both the body and the mind. That said, any amount of Lovingkindness practice can help shift your state, and begin to have ripple effects out into the world.

The phrases shared below are traditional. Many people like to personalize the phrases to make them feel more comfortable and relevant. Choose phrases that answer one of the core self-compassion questions, "What do I need?" Examples of universal human needs are to be loved, seen, heard, respected, safe, peaceful, and so forth. Play with the traditional phrases and your own to see what resonates most deeply with you.

Time: Start with 2 – 5 minutes of practice. Increase the time and frequency as you become more comfortable with the practice. You can increase the time by repeating the cycle more often, or by adding sections into the middle between step one and step three.

STEP ONE

Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably with the eyes closed or gently gazing downward. This practice is also suitable to do lying down, standing, or walking. Set your intention for opening your heart/mind to lovingkindness.

STEP TWO

Begin by offering words of lovingkindness to yourself. Say the words silently or in a soft, loving tone as you speak to yourself. Repeat as many times and at whatever pace allows you to focus on each phrase and soak it in. As your mind wanders, which is natural, bring your attention back to the phrases again and again.

May I be safe
May I be happy
May I be healthy
May I live with ease

Next, think of someone who brings a smile to your face; someone who has been kind and supportive to you. It can be a person alive in the world, or one who has passed, someone that you've known personally or simply admire. It's even fun to do this by thinking of your favorite four-legged friend. Imagine their presence by your side, and offer the phrases of lovingkindness to them.

May you be safe
May you be happy
May you be healthy
May you live with ease

Now, call to mind someone who is dealing with a challenge, or someone that you have a challenge with. Imagine their presence and offer the phrases of lovingkindness to them. In this middle section you can also experiment with someone who is a simple acquaintance, or even strangers that you pass on the street. We are working on shining compassionate attention beyond ourselves.

May you be safe
May you be happy
May you be healthy
May you live with ease

Next is an example of an additional section you can add as you grow your practice. Perhaps you are in an organization, in a community, with a group, a class, thinking about your family, or a circle of friends. You can add the "You "and "I" together, and send lovingkindness to "we."

May we be safe
May we be happy
May we be healthy
May we live with ease

STEP THREE

The last part of the meditation offers us the opportunity to send well wishes for all beings everywhere. Initially, this may seem like a big stretch, and yet it is the aspect that moves us to recognize our common humanity most clearly. Yes, we are all connected. We are growing our compassionate stance by sending lovingkindness beyond the immediate circle of our obvious connections. See if you can open your heart and cultivate compassionate for everyone.

May all beings be safe
May all beings be happy
May all beings be healthy
May all beings live with ease

Closing

When you are ready, end the repetition of phrases. Notice if you feel any different in any parts of your body, or if your emotional status has shifted. This meditation can be repeated multiple times throughout the day, and continues to deepen its impact with more practice. Enjoy!

PS. Here are all the phrases together for a streamlined practice.

May I be safe
May I be happy
May I be healthy
May I live with ease

May you be safe
May you be happy
May you be healthy
May you live with ease

May we be safe
May we be happy
May we be healthy
May we live with ease

May all beings be safe
May all beings be happy
May all beings be healthy
May all beings live with ease

Practice: Interconnected

This exercise is designed to help us remember that we are connected to everyone and everything. When we do that, it becomes easier to relate, respect, and trust others. Recognizing our shared human experience with others leads us to deeper places of cooperation, collaboration, and connection. It also helps us break through the isolation and loneliness that are rampant in today's fast-paced society.

This practice can start very simply and go as deeply as you want it to go. Practice this regularly, and see what new interconnections you can find. As science demonstrates, we share infinite connections, so you will never run out of new paths to explore.

Time Commitment: 3-5 minutes

STEP ONE

Pick an ordinary object to consider. One of the easiest to use is food on your plate at a meal, but this practice can start anywhere. Wherever it starts, it inevitably ends with the same intricate, beautiful weaving of interconnectedness that is our existence.

STEP TWO

Begin to think about all the people who were directly involved in getting the food on your plate to you. Think about the people who planted, tended and harvested the ingredients that went into what you are eating. Think about the people who processed and packaged the food. Consider those who transported the food and got it ready for you, say at the grocery store or in a restaurant kitchen.

STEP THREE

Now think about everything that went into what you considered in Step Two. Consider all the materials that were required to grow the food and get it to you. There is all the packaging that was used, all the equipment used, with each of its component parts. Someone had to build the trucks and tractors and conveyor belts that were between you and the origin of each ingredient, and someone had to work to source the raw materials that went into making all that equipment. Think of all the energy sources that powered the equipment that was used. Think about the clothes that were worn by all the people in the chain up until now and all those who made those clothes and provided the raw materials for the clothes.

STEP FOUR

Now, think of the rain that fell to water the crops that went into what you find on your plate. That water has likely been on this earth for millions of years, and has gone through countless number of evaporation, precipitation, consumption and returning cycles. The water that nourished the crops has touched thousands of other living things on this earth, and the water molecules in the food you are eating have been on an amazing, endless journey across time and the geography of the earth. Our interconnectedness is with everyone and everything.

Closing

Reflect on what you've discovered. Recognize that your actions also ripple out into the world and touch everyone just as everyone has touched you.