



Building Self-Compassion

Module 3

Preparing for Self-Compassion

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Introduction

To be able to respond to ourselves compassionately, we must first be aware that we are struggling and aware when our mind leaps into self-critical thinking, which only worsens our struggle. We also need to be able to slow ourselves down, not getting caught in the whirlwind of our uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Without this slowing down and heightened awareness, we can't make a choice to try something different...to try a new compassionate approach. Any new self-compassion strategies you go on to learn in the coming modules will likely be useless, without first slowing down and becoming aware of what is happening within you.

This module will help you cultivate these skills. Slow breathing will be introduced to help you slow down your automatic self-critical reactions, and stimulate the soothe system and its calming influence. Attention retraining will also be introduced, to help you become more aware of what your mind is doing, and be more deliberate in what you would like your mind to focus on, with compassion for yourself becoming a new focus of attention.

Slowing Down

Breathing plays an important role when it comes to our physical and emotional state. When we are in threat mode, our sympathetic nervous system is active. This is the system responsible for 'revving up' our body. As a result our breathing rate can get fast, and a number of other physiological changes begin to occur to prime us for fight, flight or freeze actions. Included in this process is that the part of our brain responsible for reasoning, logic and decision making (the prefrontal cortex) temporarily shuts down, making way for the more primitive part of our brain that detects and responds to danger (the amygdala).



With all this going on, our ability to think in helpful, balanced, self-compassionate ways is very difficult, as our mind becomes consumed by being on high alert for danger. So what do we do? Well we need to slow things down. We need to stimulate the opposing force of the parasympathetic nervous system. While our sympathetic nervous system is linked to the threat mode, the parasympathetic nervous system links to our soothe mode, quietening and calming our body and mind. This calmer state gives our prefrontal cortex the chance to get back up and running, allowing for more balanced and considered thinking. Without this calming effect first occurring, we have little hope of responding to what is going on for us with an attitude of self-compassion.

Slow Breathing

Slow breathing is our key to slowing down body and mind, kick starting the parasympathetic nervous system. Slow breathing helps us to put the 'pause button on' and reset. Slow breathing may seem simple, but it is actually a deceptively powerful strategy that can help in switching us from threat to soothe mode.

The normal rate of breathing is 10-14 breaths per minute. When we are anxious and feel under threat, our breathing rate can be much, much higher than this. The type of breathing rate we recommend you try will slow your breathing to about 5 breaths per minute, so we are really winding things down.

Slowing down involves both slowing your rate of breathing and changing your breathing style. Use the following steps to be well on your way to activating the soothe system and preparing yourself for the self-compassion strategies to come.

Step 1: Ensure that you are sitting in a comfortable chair or laying on a bed

Step 2: Take a breath in for 4 seconds (through the nose if possible)

Step 3: Hold the breath for 2 seconds

Step 4: Release the breath for 6 seconds (again through the nose if possible)

Step 5: Pause slightly before breathing in again

Step 6: Then practice, practice, practice!

Slow Breathing Tips

When you first begin changing your breathing, it may be difficult to slow your breathing down to this 4-in, 2-hold, 6-out rate. You might try using a 3-in, 1-hold, 4-out breathing rate to start off with. Play around and see what works for you, as long as you are slowing your breath down as much as you comfortably can, and your breath out is longer than the breath in.

When you are doing your breathing exercises, make sure that you are using a stomach breathing style rather than a chest breathing style. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in, and fall when you breathe out. Don't get frustrated if this doesn't happen straight away, it often takes time and practice to be able to breathe from your belly. Just do your best and see how you improve over time.

Try to practice at least once or twice a day. You could choose one lengthy practice session a day (e.g., 20mins per day) or lots of smaller practice sessions (e.g., four lots of 5 minutes per day). Initially practice at a time when you can relax, relatively free from distraction. As you improve at the skill of slow breathing, you might then choose to practice anytime, anywhere, when you have a spare moment (e.g., waiting in a shopping queue, or travelling on the bus). The ultimate aim is that regardless of where you are and what you are doing, when you notice you are having a hard time emotionally, we want to build a new habit of being able to use your breath to activate a calming physical state. If you can do this, you are then in the best position possible to enlist some self-compassion during tough times.

Attention Retraining

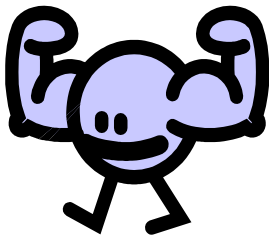
What our mind pays attention to, and how it pays attention, is another factor that contributes to our emotional and physical state. Much of the time we lack awareness of what we are experiencing, just being pushed along through life by our thoughts and feelings. People often refer to this as being on autopilot or being 'mindless'.

To enlist self-compassion, we first need to be aware or *catch* that we are struggling and that we are fuelling our struggle with self-criticism.

We also need to be able to mentally stand back from what we are experiencing, to *watch* or observe what is going on with our thoughts and feelings, rather than getting too caught up in them. We need to stand back enough to be able to reflect on what is happening but not run away from our struggle, as a compassionate person would not run away from someone suffering.

Finally, we also need to be able to deliberately *redirect* our attention to more self-compassionate ideas in order to stimulate the soothe system when needed, meaning that where we place our attention is a more conscious choice.

Putting this all together means that we need to train our attention to: **catch, watch and redirect**. Catching where our attention has gone, watching in a detachment manner whatever it was caught on, and then purposely redirecting our attention to where we choose in that moment. And then of course repeat. Catching, watching and redirecting as many times as needed, because as we know, our attention wanders a lot!



So how do we get our attention to do these three things? Well, we need to give it regular exercise! Think of your attention as like a muscle... if you don't exercise it regularly, it will become weak and won't work so well.

There are two ways you can give your attention a regular workout, mundane task focusing and meditation, both of which are mindfulness-based attention retraining exercises. *Mindfulness* is a term that refers to deliberately paying attention to what is happening in the present moment, and doing so with an accepting attitude towards whatever you notice. In this way you become the watcher or observer of whatever you are experiencing (i.e., your breath, body sensations, thoughts, feelings, sounds, tastes, smells, sights, etc). Not judging as good or bad whatever you are experiencing. Not trying to stop or change whatever you are experiencing. Just watching.

Mindfulness also involves practising how to notice when your attention has wandered away from the present moment to something else, and then gently redirecting your attention back to the here and now. Mindfulness is not an attempt to control your thoughts and feelings or to make them go away. Instead it is about allowing these to be present within you, and at the same time choosing to shift your attention back on to something you would like to attend to in the present moment.

Mundane Task Focusing

You may have noticed that when you are doing everyday household jobs like the dishes or the ironing, your mind is not really on the task at hand, but likely on autopilot. With mundane task focussing, the goal is to gradually practice sustaining your attention on a mundane activity, thus giving your attention a good workout.

The good thing about mundane task focusing, is that you are not having to do anything extra in your day, it is just about changing the way you pay attention to the things you are already doing.

Write down the various routine tasks you do, that you could use as an opportunity to exercise your attention. Mundane tasks could even include sitting, walking, eating, showering, brushing teeth – not just household chores.

When doing your mundane tasks, try to become aware of all the sensory aspects of the task. Hone in on whatever senses (i.e., touch, sight, sound, smell, taste) are most appropriate given the nature of the task at hand. Each time you notice your mind has wandered off the task, which will of course happen for everyone, anchor your attention back to the task by focussing, non-judgementally, on one or more of the following:

Touch: What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on your body do you have contact with it? Are there areas of your body with more or less contact with the task?

Sight: What do you notice about the task? What catches your eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours?

Sound: What sounds do you notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task?

Smell: What smells do you notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?

Taste: What flavours do you notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?

Meditation

Using a meditation exercise is another way that you can train yourself to be more aware of what your attention gets caught in (particularly thoughts and feelings), to redirected your attention to a present focus of your choice, and to deal with your inevitable wandering mind. A common meditation practice is to be mindful of your breathing, noticing any time your mind wanders away from the breath, catching its wandering, and redirecting it back to the breath as your anchor to the present moment. Your breath is something that is always with you, and something we typically are not aware of, so it is the perfect point of focus to use for some attention retraining.



Meditation Steps

- 1) To begin the practice, sit down in a chair and adopt a comfortable posture, then ask yourself, what am I experiencing right now? What thoughts are around, what feelings are around, and what body sensations? Allow yourself to just acknowledge, observe and describe these experiences to yourself, without judgment and without trying to change them or make them go away. Spend 30 seconds to 1 minute just doing this.
- 2) Now bring your focus of awareness to your breath, focusing on the sensations of your breath as you inhale and exhale. Bring your awareness to the back and forth movements of the sensations in your belly from moment to moment, letting thoughts go with each out breath. Maybe say to yourself 'relax' or 'let go' on each outward breath. If your mind wanders away to other thoughts, feelings and sensations – again do not try to change them or make them go away. Simply acknowledge their presence, allowing them to be there, then letting go with your attention and focusing back on your breath. Spend about 1 or 2 minutes doing this.
- 3) Now expand your awareness to sensing your whole body breathing, being aware of sensations throughout your body. If there are any strong feelings around, maybe saying to yourself “whatever it is, it is OK, just let me feel it.” Allowing yourself to breathe with these feelings, and if your mind wanders to bothersome thoughts or sensations, just acknowledge and let go of these - focusing back on sensing your whole body breathing. Continue doing this for about another 1 or 2 minutes.

As you start to get more familiar with this meditation skill, you can try increasing the time of steps 2 & 3, until the meditation takes ten minutes or more.

It is important to remember the aim of attention retraining, which sometimes people lose sight of. Practicing mundane task focusing and meditation will over time:

- increase your awareness of where attention is at any moment so you can recognise when it is getting locked on pain, suffering and self-criticism;
- help you be able to flexibly re-direct your attention to where you would like it to be – perhaps some of the self-compassion strategies to come; and
- help you to notice when your attention inevitably wanders away from being self-compassionate, and be able to bring your attention back again.

It is also very important to remember that the goal of mundane task focusing and meditation is not to have perfect sustained attention in the present moment 100% of the time, or to have a blank mind or no thoughts and feelings. That is impossible! When you try to maintain your attention on the present moment you will notice that **your mind will wander**. You might start to think about the future or past, you may drift back into self-criticism or something else may capture your attention. **This is ok. This is what minds do.** The task is to notice when your mind wanders and gently escort it back to the present 'task at hand' (i.e., whatever it is that you were focused on – breath, the washing, cleaning your teeth, etc.). It is all about awareness of attention, noticing and watching where it is, and bringing it back to the present as often as is required.

When you notice that your mind has wandered during these attention retraining exercises, be careful not to criticise yourself for this. Instead see if you can bring some compassion to this. After all, it is completely normal. Instead, think about each and every “wander” as another opportunity to practice your skills of bringing your attention back to the here and now. Think of it this way, **the skill you are learning is not to have perfectly sustained attention, but instead to catch your attention when it wanders and bring it back.** As such, it really doesn’t matter how many times your attention wanders, as that is an essential part of the training.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Attention retraining (i.e., *Mundane Task Focusing and Meditation*) and *Slow Breathing* are not quick fixes, nor easy, and so they all require regular practice. These are all skills and skills require time to develop. Also remember that your attention is like a muscle; if you stop the regular exercise your muscle won’t work quite so well.

Some people find it easier to practice slow breathing and meditation while listening to a voice providing prompts. There are many of these sorts of audios available from various sources which you may wish to try. There are also guided breathing and attention retraining audios available on the CCI website.

Given the importance of practice, it is good to plan specific times each day when you will do your practice, as you would with any skill you were trying to improve. You can use the *Slow Breathing & Attention Retraining Diary* to keep track of your practice with all three suggested exercises.

We recommend that you practice slow breathing, mundane task focussing and meditation each at least once daily. As already mentioned, for slow breathing this could be one long session a day or lots of little sessions throughout the day. Likewise meditation sessions can be lengthy or brief. If you are really struggling to find time to meditate, you could instead increase the number of mundane task focussing workouts you do per day. Remember, mundane task focussing isn’t asking you to do anything extra, only to approach the activities you are already doing in a particular way.

Practice of all three skills is essential to help you slow down and increase your awareness. They lay a solid foundation for the other self-compassion strategies to come. Without regular and consistent practice of these, the other strategies may not be as effective. So while it might be tempting to say something like “Ah, it is just breathing, I’ve done breathing before, it isn’t that important, it won’t hurt to just skip this and get to the other bits...” Please take the time to complete this module thoroughly, and hence put yourself in the best position to gain maximum benefit from the rest of the *Building Self-Compassion* modules.



Slow Breathing & Attention Retraining Diary

You can use this sheet to plan your slow breathing, mundane task focusing and meditation practice and to record your progress along the way. The last column asks you to jot down any comments about the experience – What did you notice? What was your practice like? What impact did it have on you? How does it compare to previous times you have practiced?

Date & Time	Task	Duration	Comments
<i>e.g., Monday 5th, 9:00am</i>	<i>Meditation</i>	<i>6 mins</i>	<i>My mind kept drifting, but I just kept refocusing on my breath</i>
<i>Monday 5th, 12:30am</i>	<i>Slow Breathing</i>	<i>10mins</i>	<i>I did it during my lunch break. It really slowed me down. I felt a lot calmer when I got back to work.</i>
<i>Monday 5th, 6.00pm</i>	<i>Mundane task focussing (while doing the dishes)</i>	<i>10 mins</i>	<i>I noticed lots of things I don't usually notice. It was probably a little easier than the meditation as I had something specific to focus my mind on.</i>

Module Summary

- To build self-compassion we must first be able to slow down, kick-start the parasympathetic nervous system, and switch on our soothe mode to calm our body and mind. We use slow breathing to achieve this calming state, placing us in the best position to then be able to think and behave in self-compassionate ways.
- Slow breathing involves breathing through the nose, breathing from the belly, and breathing to a 4-in, 2-hold, 6- out rhythm, or whatever adaptation feels comfortable and slowing to you.
- To be able to be self-compassionate we must also be aware when we are struggling and when our mind leaps into self-critical thinking, and instead deliberately redirect our attention to self-compassionate ideas. We use mindfulness based attention retraining exercises to achieve this awareness and flexibility with our attention.
- Mundane task focusing and meditation exercises teach us to be aware of where our attention is at any given moment, gently redirect it back to a particular present task focus, and when our attention inevitably wanders, being able to catch it and bring it back to the present task again.
- Slow breathing and attention retraining are both important skills for laying the foundation for self-compassion, and require lots of daily practice. Without these skills under your belt, the other self-compassion strategies to come won't work as well.



Coming up next ...

In Module 4, we will introduce the central skills for building self-compassion, which involve developing compassionate imagery...

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Compassion Focused Therapy, which is an extension of and adjunct to Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy. These modules particularly draw on the work of Paul Gilbert and Kristen Neff.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references that informed the development of modules in this information package.

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