

Chapter 1

An Introduction to Mindful Self-Compassion

Life is difficult for all of us. If we carefully examine our moment-to-moment experience, we discover that we're under some degree of stress from the instant we wake up ("Uh-oh, I'm late!") until the time we fall asleep ("I really should have . . ."). Usually we don't know it. Right now, for example, is there any discomfort in your body? Are you worrying about something? Are you hungry? And shouldn't you really be clearing out your email inbox rather than starting to read a new book? Ironically, recognizing and embracing our challenges, large and small, can substantially enrich our lives. That's mindfulness. And embracing *ourselves* in the midst of our difficulties with care and concern can enrich our lives even more. That's self-compassion. Together, they constitute the resource of *mindful self-compassion*.

Mindfulness and Compassion

The past two decades have seen an explosion of research into the benefits of *mindfulness*, roughly defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness promotes mental and physical well-being in myriad ways, and thus provides a foundation for living our lives wisely and compassionately. The opposite of mindfulness is being on autopilot, daydreaming about past and future events, hardly aware of what's happening in us or around us. A wandering mind, though hardwired in our brains, can lead us

into dark corners of regret and worry from which it may take days, weeks, or even longer to break free.

Our modern definitions of mindfulness tend to emphasize attention and awareness over the *qualities* of mindful awareness, such as acceptance, loving-kindness, and compassion. This is unfortunate, and our language surely contributes to this lopsided view of mindfulness. For example, the word *mindfulness* is a translation of the ancient Pali word *sati*, which refers to awareness, and it is associated with the Pali word *citta*, which literally means “heart–mind.” We do not have a word for mind or awareness in the English language that captures both the mental and emotional aspects of mindful awareness.

To complicate matters further, when someone says, “I practice mindfulness meditation,” they are probably referring to one or more of the following three types of meditation: (1) focused attention, (2) open monitoring, or (3) loving-kindness and compassion (Salzberg, 2011b). *Focused attention* (or concentration) is the practice of returning attention again and again to one object, such as the breath. Concentration helps calm the mind. *Open monitoring* (or *choiceless awareness*) is paying attention to what is most salient and alive in our field of awareness, one moment after the next. Open monitoring helps the practitioner to develop spacious awareness and understand the nature of the mind. *Loving-kindness and compassion* meditation cultivates the qualities of warmth and goodwill toward oneself and others, which are essential for tolerating and transforming difficult states of mind.

Most of the research on mindfulness has been aimed at the practices of focused attention and open monitoring. However, research on loving-kindness and compassion meditation has increased in recent years (Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011). Neurological evidence suggests that all three types of meditation produce overlapping, yet distinct, brain patterns (Brewer et al., 2011; Desbordes et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2013; Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). For the purposes of this book, a simple way of describing mindful awareness that does not leave out the heart qualities is *loving awareness* or *compassionate awareness*.

When mindfulness is in full bloom—when we feel calm and alert amidst the full range of our thoughts, feelings, and sensations—our awareness is permeated with an attitude of loving-kindness and compassion. Full mindfulness feels like love itself. Unfortunately, our mindfulness is rarely complete, commingled as it is with anxiety, longing, or confusion. This is particularly the case when things become difficult in our lives—when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate. Not only does our awareness become tinged by our moods, but our sense of self is often taken hostage, and we become engulfed in self-criticism and self-doubt. We can go from “I *feel* bad” to “I don’t *like* this feeling” to “I don’t *want* this feeling” to “I *shouldn’t* have this feeling” to “Something is *wrong* with me” to “I’m *bad!*” In the blink of an eye, we move from “I *feel* bad” to “I *am* bad.” That’s when self-compassion

comes in. Sometimes we need to comfort and soothe ourselves—the *experiencer*—before we can relate to our *experience* in a more mindful way.

Self-compassion may be considered the heart of mindfulness when we meet personal suffering. Mindfulness invites us to open to suffering with spacious awareness. Self-compassion adds, “Be kind to yourself in the midst of suffering.” Mindfulness asks, “What am I *experiencing*?” and self-compassion adds, “What do I *need*?” Together, mindfulness and self-compassion constitute a state of warmhearted, accepting presence during difficult moments in our lives. They are like best friends.

Research shows that self-compassion is positively associated with psychological well-being, including less psychopathology (such as anxiety, depression, and stress) and more positive states of mind (such as happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction) (Barnard & Curry, 2011; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Neff, Long, et al., 2018; Zessin, Dickhauser, & Garbade, 2015). Self-compassion is also associated with increased motivation, healthy behaviors and immune functioning, positive body image, and resilient coping (Allen & Leary, 2010; Braun, Park, & Gorin, 2016; Breines & Chen, 2012; Friis, Johnson, Cutfield, & Consedine, 2016; Terry & Leary, 2011), as well as more caring and compassionate relationship behavior (Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Yarnell & Neff, 2012). In other words, self-compassion has many benefits and is worth cultivating (see Chapter 3).

Mindful Self-Compassion

The Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program was the first training program created for the general public that was specifically designed to enhance a person’s self-compassion. Mindfulness-based training programs such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013) also increase self-compassion (see Chapter 4), but they do so implicitly, as a welcome byproduct. We wondered, “What would happen if self-compassion skills were *explicitly* taught as the primary focus of the training?”

MSC is loosely modeled on the MBSR program, especially in its focus on experiential learning and inquiry-based teaching, as well as in its structure (eight weekly sessions of 2+ hours each, plus a retreat). Some key practices in MBSR have been adapted for MSC by highlighting the *quality* of awareness—warmth, kindness—in those practices. Most MSC practices have been specifically designed to cultivate compassion and self-compassion.

MSC can be accurately described as *mindfulness-based self-compassion training*. It is a hybrid of mindfulness and compassion, with an emphasis on self-compassion. Mindfulness is the foundation of self-compassion since we

need to be mindfully aware that we're suffering *while* we're suffering (no small feat!) in order to have a compassionate response. Although mindfulness is already part of self-compassion, we named this program Mindful Self-Compassion to highlight the key role of mindfulness in self-compassion training. For more on the integration of mindfulness into MSC, see Chapter 11 (Session 2).

MSC was designed for the general public. It is therapeutic, but it isn't psychotherapy. The focus of MSC is on building the *resources* of mindfulness and self-compassion. In contrast, therapy tends to focus on healing old wounds. Since MSC is a structured classroom training program that takes place over a limited period, we do not have the capacity to focus on the details of each person's life as we might in individual or group therapy. Nonetheless, many MSC participants report that MSC has a profound impact on their psychological well-being, especially by healing old wounds. The therapeutic aspect of MSC may be considered a byproduct of developing the resources of mindfulness and self-compassion. (See Part IV for more on the relationship of self-compassion to psychotherapy.)

The MSC Curriculum

The complete MSC curriculum is presented in Part III of this book. MSC is designed to move participants from a conceptual understanding of mindfulness and self-compassion to a felt sense of those concepts, and to provide tools for evoking mindfulness and self-compassion in daily life and making this evocation a habit. The sessions have been carefully sequenced to build upon one another. Each session includes brief didactic topics, followed by exercises that give participants a visceral sense of the subject, and then by inquiry-based exploration of the participants' direct experience.

The needs of MSC participants tend to vary greatly. Participants are encouraged to be experimental in choosing and adapting the practices to their own needs, and to become their own best teachers. MSC teachers strive to create a safe atmosphere wherein each individual's experience of the practices is honored and appreciated.

Teachers are strongly encouraged to find their own teaching voices—to make the program their own. However, the message is “Find your own voice, not your own curriculum.” This is especially important in the initial stages of teaching MSC because the structural integrity of the program only reveals itself after it has been taught a few times. There is some flexibility in the curriculum for minor adjustments, such as what to emphasize when presenting concepts to various participants, but teachers should not create new core practices or adjust the content of the program by more than 15% if they still want to call it MSC. And, again, no one should attempt to teach MSC without formal teacher training.

Teaching MSC

The most powerful teaching tool of an MSC teacher is embodiment of mindful compassion. As the saying goes, “People will want what you know if they know that you care.” If you take a moment to reflect upon the teachers who’ve had the greatest impact in your life, they’re likely to be the ones who had compassion for the challenges you faced during the learning process and knew how to help you through them. Therefore, the most effective way to *teach* self-compassion is to *be* compassionate.

MSC teachers are expected to maintain a personal practice of mindfulness and self-compassion of about 30 minutes per day, especially while teaching a course (and particularly the practices taught each week). Personal practice keeps the challenge of learning mindfulness and self-compassion fresh in a teacher’s mind. It also gives a teacher’s words authenticity and power. Teaching MSC is a heart-to-heart transmission, imparted through emotional resonance between teachers and students. Students in the presence of a teacher who embodies mindfulness and self-compassion will experience a host of qualities—respect, humility, self-awareness, tenderness—that will support the students’ personal practice.

MSC includes a particular style of interacting with students known as *inquiry*, which will be familiar to readers who have already been trained to teach mindfulness. Inquiry is a *self-to-other* interaction that mirrors for the student a mindful or compassionate *self-to-self* relationship. Inquiry usually follows a practice or class exercise and begins with the questions “What did you notice?” and “What did you feel?” Teachers help to illuminate students’ direct experience through gentle, nonjudgmental questioning. When an experience is difficult to bear, a student is guided to discover how mindfulness and compassion could be brought to that particular experience. For example, the teacher may ask, “Can you bring some kindness to that experience?”, “What do you think you *need* right now?”, or “What might you say to a friend who felt just as you do?” MSC has its own flavor of inquiry, which is key to teaching the program, so half of the practice sessions in the MSC teacher training program are dedicated to practicing the art of inquiry. Examples of inquiry follow almost every meditation, informal practice, and exercise described in Part III of this book.

Other MSC teaching modalities are delivering didactic topics, guiding meditations, leading class exercises, and reading poems. All these aspects of teaching have one common denominator—*teaching from within*. For example, didactic topics should be delivered in a teacher’s own, authentic voice, and teachers should listen to and follow their own instructions while guiding meditations. Teachers can more readily adjust the tone of class exercises when they feel their own words come from within. Poems also have power to transmit subtle states of mind when teachers allow the words to resonate in their own being.

MSC and Mindfulness Training

MSC is designed to cultivate mindfulness *and* self-compassion because we cannot be genuinely compassionate without mindfulness, and, conversely, we need compassion to be fully mindful. Mindfulness has four main roles in MSC: (1) to help students recognize when they are suffering; (2) to anchor awareness in the present moment when students are emotionally activated; (3) to cultivate awareness of emotions in the body to regulate emotion; and (4) to develop equanimity, which makes space for compassionate action. The question may arise: “How is MSC similar or different from established mindfulness training programs?”

The most widely disseminated mindfulness training today is MBSR, originally developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) to bring relief to patients in a university hospital who were suffering from chronic pain and other difficult-to-treat conditions. Three core practices in MBSR are breath meditation, the body scan, and mindful movement. MBSR instructors teach loving-kindness and compassion implicitly, by embodying those qualities in how they interact with their students and by encouraging a friendly attitude toward all experience. Loving-kindness meditation is also taught during the daylong retreat, but the primary purpose of MBSR is to develop equanimity in the midst of stressful life events through nonjudgmental, moment-to-moment awareness.

MBCT is a cognitive-behavioral therapy adaptation of MBSR for the treatment of recurrent depression, developed by Zindel Segal and colleagues (2013). Both MBSR and MBCT have been shown to enhance self-compassion in practitioners (see Chapter 4). Loving-kindness meditation is not included in the MBCT protocol, due to concern about emotionally activating this vulnerable population; MBCT focuses more on cultivating decentered, mindful awareness of depressive thinking.

Three core practices found in MBSR and MBCT have been adapted for the MSC program, with explicit emphasis on warmth and kindness. For example, the Affectionate Breathing meditation in MSC is a type of breath meditation, but invites participants to savor the gentle rhythm of the breath, especially the experience of being internally rocked and caressed by the breath. This meditation is less about building concentration than about feeling held and nourished by the breath, which inevitably strengthens concentration. The Compassionate Body Scan in MSC is similar to the MBSR body scan, but focuses on appreciating how hard each part of the body works for us, wishing each part well, and allowing the heart to soften with compassion when emotional or physical discomfort arises. MSC also has a movement practice—Compassionate Movement—in which awareness is brought to stress points in the body, and participants are encouraged to allow their bodies to move in a spontaneous manner to alleviate the stress.

While the practice of loving-kindness meditation in MBSR typically only occurs during the retreat day, it has been elevated to a core meditation

in MSC. (MSC has an additional practice that helps participants discover their own loving-kindness and self-compassion phrases.) Conversely, whereas the body scan is a core meditation in MBSR, it is typically only taught during the retreat day in MSC. These differences between MBSR and MSC reflect the relative emphases of the two programs: spacious, present-moment awareness in MBSR, and warmth and goodwill toward oneself in MSC. MBSR and MSC teach skills that complement one another.

From our experience, seasoned MBSR and MBCT teachers can learn to teach MSC quite easily when they understand the principles and practices of MSC. Valuable skills that MBSR and MBCT teachers have usually acquired are an established personal meditation practice; sensing the difference between “fixing” and “being with” distress; understanding the centrality of kindness in both teaching and practice; and knowing how to engage a group in a spacious, nonjudgmental manner.

We have found that our best compassion teachers are often steeped in mindfulness, just as some of the finest mindfulness teachers are full of compassion. *Self-compassion* training brings a new lens to mindfulness training, however. When a practitioner is struggling, a mindfulness teacher might ask, “Can you make some room for that experience?” or “Can you hold that experience in tender awareness?” A self-compassion teacher might add, “Can you bring some kindness to *yourself* in this moment?” or “What do you think you *need* right now?” Mindfulness focuses on moment-to-moment experience, whereas compassion focuses on the suffering person, or “self.”

Mindfulness teachers may have questions or concerns about MSC that reflect differences between these two approaches. Some of these questions are now discussed.

Isn't warming up awareness with loving-kindness and compassion a subtle way of resisting moment-to-moment experience? This is indeed an inherent danger in self-compassion practice. Beginning students try to throw compassion at suffering to make it go away, introducing a subtle element of striving and resistance to present-moment experience. Over time, however, students discover that self-compassion involves allowing the heart to melt in the heat of suffering by abandoning striving and resistance. While warming up awareness may be more intentional with self-compassion, it isn't more effortful. Mindfulness and self-compassion are both skills that enable practitioners to release their instinctive resistance to discomfort.

Why do we need compassion training at all? Aren't compassion and self-compassion already in mindfulness training? When mindfulness is fully present, it is suffused with kindness and compassion. However, it is very difficult to meet intense and disturbing emotions, such as shame, and remain fully mindful. When we experience shame, for example, our field of awareness tends to narrow in fear, and our attention turns away in

disgust. Shame also makes us dissociate from our bodies and hollows out the observing self. That's when we need to reconstitute the observing self with explicit compassion. When we feel safer within the embrace of compassion, we can be mindful again.

If we comfort ourselves when we suffer, won't we bypass important life lessons such as impermanence, suffering, and selflessness? It's true that self-compassion can be used to sugar-coat difficult experience and hamper learning. Any practice can be misused. That's why we first need to *open* to suffering with mindful awareness before comforting ourselves with compassion. How much suffering we allow into our lives before engaging compassion depends, in part, on what we are trying to achieve as practitioners—wisdom or compassion. A wisdom practitioner may wish to linger longer with suffering in order to discover insights such as the impermanence of suffering, whereas a compassion practitioner may prefer to cultivate a tender, spontaneous heart that moves quickly and spontaneously toward alleviation of suffering.

Self-compassion activates old relational wounds. Isn't it dangerous to do that in an 8-week program? The foundation of self-compassion training is a sense of safety (see Chapter 8). MSC students are advised, and shown throughout the program how, to attend to their emotional safety. This may mean *not* engaging in a practice when a student feels too vulnerable, or practicing self-compassion *behaviorally* by drinking a cup of tea or taking a walk. We are all continually opening or closing to our experience throughout the day, and when students need to close, we encourage them to do that. Pushing ourselves to open when we should be closing may lead to emotional harm and isn't self-compassionate. Therefore, learning to practice formal meditation for extended periods, which can be emotionally overwhelming for some participants, is less important in MSC than knowing when we're suffering (mindfulness) and responding with kindness (self-compassion).

Where to Start?

Many people wonder whether they should start learning mindfulness first, or begin with self-compassion training. This is an important empirical question that should be addressed in coming years. Until then, here are a few preliminary guidelines.

Accurate Information

Prospective participants are usually quite knowledgeable about their own needs, and when they receive accurate information, they can usually decide

for themselves which training is best for them. An orientation session can help to facilitate this process.

Self-Criticism

Mindfulness practitioners who are self-critical may find it difficult to practice mindfulness consistently until they engage their inner critics. Therefore, self-critical people might benefit from starting with self-compassion practice before taking mindfulness training. Conversely, people who are low in self-criticism may have less need for self-compassion and may benefit more from getting a solid grounding in mindfulness before adding self-compassion to the mix.

Commitment

Inevitably, the best practice for each person is the one they are most committed to. Therefore, after students have tried different mindfulness and self-compassion exercises, it is their responsibility to become their own best teachers. That means knowing which practices are most enjoyable, meaningful, and effective for them, and practicing them regularly.

Self-Compassion and Compassion for Others

Some people feel uncomfortable that the focus of MSC is *self*-compassion rather than compassion for others. Here are some common questions about this.

Doesn't the focus on "self" in self-compassion generate more suffering than it alleviates? We completely agree that a rigid, separate "self" is the source of most unnecessary emotional suffering in our lives, particularly the struggle to protect and promote our egos against ceaseless threats, real and imagined. Paradoxically, however, when we suffer and turn toward ourselves with compassion, our sense of separateness begins to dissolve. An example is what happens when we're struggling, and then we place our hands on the heart to comfort and support ourselves. That act of kindness usually allows us to disengage from self-oriented, ruminative thinking and see the world with new eyes.

Isn't there a better word than "self-compassion"? Our language tends to make ideas more solid than they are. An equivalent expression for self-compassion is "inner compassion." We call it "self-compassion" because it makes sense to beginning practitioners who might be battling with themselves. When a practitioner discovers through meditative inquiry that there

is no fixed “self,” then “inner compassion” becomes a more fitting expression.

Isn't self-compassion training emotionally activating? Everyone has difficult memories that are likely to resurface during self-compassion training. MSC was designed to meet old wounds in a healthy new way—with mindfulness and compassion. Emotional activation is an essential and unavoidable part of the transformation process. A key reason why mindfulness is taught alongside self-compassion is to stabilize awareness in the midst of strong emotions. Group support is another important part of self-compassion training—holding suffering in a culture of kindness.

Shouldn't MSC focus on training both self-compassion and compassion for others? MSC was never meant to be a complete compassion training program. In our opinion, for compassion to be complete, it should be both inner and outer. Unfortunately, there is a pervasive bias around the world toward valuing compassion for others over compassion for oneself. Hence, our special focus on self-compassion is intended to correct the imbalance. Our agenda is really quite humble—to *include* ourselves in the circle of compassion. MSC also teaches compassion for others, but links it to self-compassion, since that is our main focus. Research shows that MSC training develops compassion for others (Neff & Germer, 2013), but also that enhancing compassion for others helps us grow in self-compassion (Breines & Chen, 2013).

Shall We Begin?

You will now be guided through the MSC program. The remainder of Part I provides the theoretical and research foundations of self-compassion and self-compassion training (Chapters 2–4). Part II describes the pedagogy of self-compassion training. Chapter 5 reviews the structure and curriculum of MSC; Chapter 6 summarizes how to teach didactic topics and to guide meditations and class exercises; Chapter 7 focuses on embodying self-compassion and becoming a compassionate teacher; Chapter 8 offers insights and suggestions for managing group process; and Chapter 9 begins the journey into inquiry-based learning and teaching.

Part III provides an in-depth look at each of the eight sessions of the MSC program (one chapter per session), plus a separate chapter on the half-day retreat. Each chapter begins with an outline of the session (or retreat), followed by a description of a didactic topic; complete instructions for each meditation, informal practice, and class exercise; and samples of inquiry following the experiential activities. (The book's Appendices contain additional resources for study, practice, and teaching.)

Part IV focuses specifically on the integration of self-compassion into psychotherapy. It outlines similarities and differences between MSC and therapy, and addresses special issues like trauma and shame in more detail.

In this text, we alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to a single individual. We have made this choice to promote ease of reading as our language and culture continue to evolve, and not out of disrespect toward readers who identify with other personal pronouns. We sincerely hope that everyone will feel included. We also use lowercase letters for the full terms for structured training programs such as MBSR or MBCT, in keeping with modern language trends, but readers should use capital letters for the full name of the 8-week program described in this book (Mindful Self-Compassion) and the acronym (MSC[®]) in other written contexts, such as articles or online content. Finally, we often apply present participles (verbs ending in *-ing*) in meditation instructions; these can seem odd when read in a book, but, when delivered orally, they help to capture a sense of continuity and connection.

We are grateful that you are embarking on the inner journey of self-compassion, and we hope that the material contained in this book will support you in your personal and professional endeavors. If, after reading this book, you wish to teach the 8-week MSC program itself, please review the teacher training pathway at <https://centerformsc.org> for further information. It is essential to take formal MSC teacher training to be prepared to teach the program, no matter the prior skill level or experience of the teacher. Additionally, since MSC can be emotionally activating, in-person training and guidance on teaching the program—especially when difficulties arise—are necessary to ensure the safety of participants.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- * When mindfulness is fully present, it is suffused with the heart qualities of loving-kindness and compassion. Heart qualities are essential for mindful awareness, especially in the midst of difficult emotions, and they can be cultivated through practice.
- * MSC is mindfulness-based self-compassion training.
- * MSC is a resource-building program designed for the general public. The emphasis of the program is on developing a mindful and compassionate relationship to emotional pain—and to ourselves—rather than healing old wounds. However, old wounds tend to surface and transform in the course of self-compassion training.
- * The curriculum contains a variety of formal meditations, informal practices, and exercises, and provides rationales for all these practices. With these skills and understanding, participants are encouraged to become their own teachers.

- * MSC has borrowed from MBSR the 8-week training structure and the inquiry-based teaching approach. Three practices have also been adapted from MBSR—breath meditation, the body scan, and mindful movement.
 - * MSC is the first structured program specifically designed to cultivate self-compassion.
 - * Formal MSC teacher training is required to safely and effectively teach the program described in this book.
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