

# COMPASSION FOCUSED THERAPY (CFT)



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## UNDERSTANDING THE MODEL

- All psychotherapies believe that therapy should be conducted in a compassionate way that is respectful, supportive, and kind
- The great psychologist Carl Rogers emphasized unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathy
- More recently, helping people develop *self-compassion (self-love)* has received attention
- Compassion for self and others has been central to Christianity and Buddhist practice for thousands of years

## COMPASSION FOCUSED THERAPY (CFT)

### COMPONENTS OF SELF-COMPASSION

- Being mindful and open to one's own suffering
- Being kind, and non self-condemning
- An awareness of sharing experiences of suffering with others rather than feeling ashamed and alone
- An openness to our common humanity

### CFT WAS DEVELOPED FOR

- People who have chronic and complex mental-health problems linked to shame and self-criticism, e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, or anger
- Who have eating disorders, suffer from emotional eating or disordered eating (CFT-E is Compassion Focused Therapy for Eating Disorders)
- Who have come from difficult (neglectful or abusive) backgrounds

CFT has its roots in an evolutionary, neuroscience and social psychology approach. It is linked to the psychology and neurophysiology of caring - both giving and receiving.

### FEELING CARED FOR

- Feeling cared for, accepted and having a sense of belonging and affiliation with others is fundamental to our physiological maturation and well-being
- This is linked to particular types of positive feelings and a neuro-hormonal profile of increased endorphins and oxytocin
- Emotions of safeness and contentment are more strongly associated with lower depression, anxiety, and stress, than are positive emotions of excitement and feeling energized

### THERE ARE DIFFERENT WAYS TO ENGAGE WITH PAINFUL EMOTIONS

- There are compassionate and non-compassionate ways to engage with painful experiences, frightening feelings or traumatic memories
- CFT is not about avoidance of the painful, or trying to "soothe it away" (for example by overeating or drugs), but rather it is a way of engaging with the painful emotions
- Many people are fearful of compassionate feelings from others, and for the self, and working with this fear is a major focus of CFT

The techniques of CFT rely on this fact: *EXPERIENCE AND FANTASY WORK THROUGH THE SAME BRAIN SYSTEMS.*

For example, whether we see something sexual or fantasize about something sexual, the sexual arousal system is the same. There aren't different brain systems for external stimuli and internal stimuli, for example thoughts, memories, fantasies, or imagination. Similarly, *self*-criticism or *self*-compassion can operate through similar

brain processes that are stimulated when *other people* are critical or compassionate to us.

## INTERVENTIONS

CFT is a multimodal therapy that builds on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. It focuses on attention, reasoning and rumination, behavior, emotions, motives and imagery. It utilizes the therapeutic relationship, Socratic dialogues, guided discovery, psycho-education (the CFT model), structured formulations, thought, emotion, behavior and body monitoring, inference chaining, functional analysis, behavioral experiments, exposure, graded tasks, compassion focused imagery, chair work, enactment of different selves, mindfulness, learning emotional tolerance, out-of session work and guided practice - to name a few.

## EVIDENCE FOR THE BENEFITS OF COMPASSION



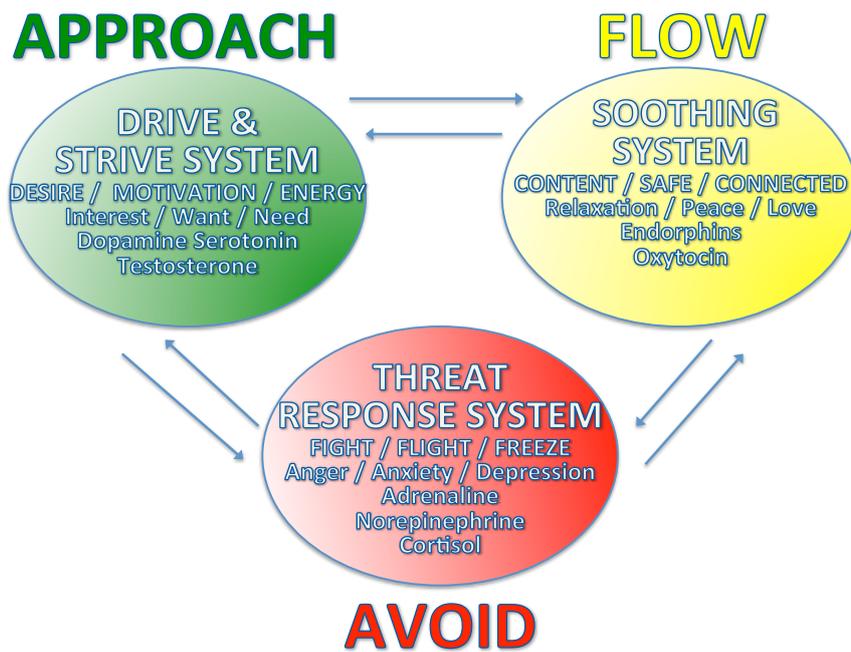
Research shows that the practice of compassion increases well-being and affects brain functioning, especially in areas of emotional regulation and impulse control. Compassionate imagery has positive effects on immune functioning, neuroendocrine and behavioral responses to stress, heart rate variability coherence, and reduces cortisol. It increases feelings of social connectedness, positive emotions and depression, anxiety, the need to overeat, and general psychopathology.

## THE THREE EMOTION-REGULATION SYSTEMS

Research in emotional processing has revealed a number of integrated circuits in the brain that give rise to different types of emotions that regulate motivation. A useful, simplified model shows that our brains contain at least three types of major emotion-regulation systems. Each one is designed to do different things.

### The Threat and Self-Protection System

- **The function of this system is to detect threats quickly and select a response, e.g., *fight, flight, freeze*, or some other coping efforts, and give us bursts of emotions such as *anxiety, anger, disgust, submission, sadness, powerlessness, hopelessness, despair***
- **Although it involves painful and difficult feelings, it evolved as a *protection* system**
- **The brain gives more priority to dealing with threat than with to pleasurable things - "better safe than sorry"**
- **The frequency and duration of activation of the threat-protection response is linked to *external contextual cues* (e.g., living in a violent household) and *internal cues* (self-criticism, rumination, worry, personal meanings, and emotional memories, including threat memories)**



### The Incentive and Resource-Seeking, Drive-Excitement System

- The function of this system is to give us positive feelings that *guide, motivate and encourage us to seek out, consume, and achieve resources* that we need in order to survive and prosper (e.g., food, sex, comforts, friendships, status, and recognition)
- The feelings are *excitement, energy and pleasure*, but can become intensified to the point of hypomania
- People with bipolar disorder can have problems with this system because it can shift from too high to too low in activation
- When balanced with the other two systems, it guides us toward important life goals
- When blocks to our wants and needs become "a threat," the threat system kicks in with anxiety, frustration, anger or sadness
- The "go-getting" system is linked to dopamine - people who take cocaine try to get this energized, hyped-up good feeling
- Disengagement from a goal can underpin a dip in mood (sadness)
- Some depressions are linked to continuing to pursue goals that cannot be achieved and a failure of disengagement and realignment of achievable goals

### The Soothing, Contentment and Safeness System

- This system enables us to bring *soothing, quiescence and peacefulness* to the self and restore balance
- Contentment is being happy with the way things are and feeling safe; not striving or wanting; an *inner peacefulness; feeling calm and connected to others*

- This contentment is different from just low-threat, which is associated with boredom and emptiness
- The system is *deeply linked to affection and kindness*
- The feelings of safeness and soothing work through the same brain systems that produce peaceful feeling associated with fulfillment and contentment
- Agency (feeling powerful) and sociability are linked to control and achievement seeking, social dominance and the (threat-focused) avoidance of rejection and isolation
- Warm and affiliative interactions, however, are linked to social connectedness, belonging and safeness as conferred by the presence and support of others

CFT makes a big distinction between *safety seeking* and *safeness*. Safety seeking is linked to the threat system and is about preventing or coping with threats. Safeness is a state of mind that enables us to *be content and at peace with ourselves and the world with relaxed attention and the ability to explore*. Safeness is not the same as low activity - when we feel safe we can be active and energized.



### Evolutionary Functional Analysis

Negative emotions are part of our emotional repertoire - like diarrhea and vomiting, they are unpleasant but have a *protective function*. So important are our protection emotions that they are the big, emotional players in our brains, and can easily override positive emotions.

Our brains did not evolve for happiness but for survival and reproduction.

So we have to need to *learn how to accept, tolerate and work with difficult emotions and low moods; they are not necessarily evidence of "something wrong" with us but are normal responses to things in our lives*. Sometimes emotion systems are working perfectly normally but the situation is problematic - e.g., a loveless marriage, being bullied, or experiencing disappointment, loss or grieving.

But sometimes *normal emotions are accentuated by our focus, beliefs, ruminations, or made worse by the ways in which we try to avoid feeling them*. Modern societies are over stimulating both our threat system (crime, financial instability) and our drive system (want more, need more, do more, social comparison) and playing havoc with our need for connectedness.

### AFFILIATION, WARMTH AND AFFECTION

- Different kinds of caring will impact and stimulate the soothing system in different ways
- Caring can be with or without warmth and affection, but it is *warmth that is most associated with soothing and endorphin release*

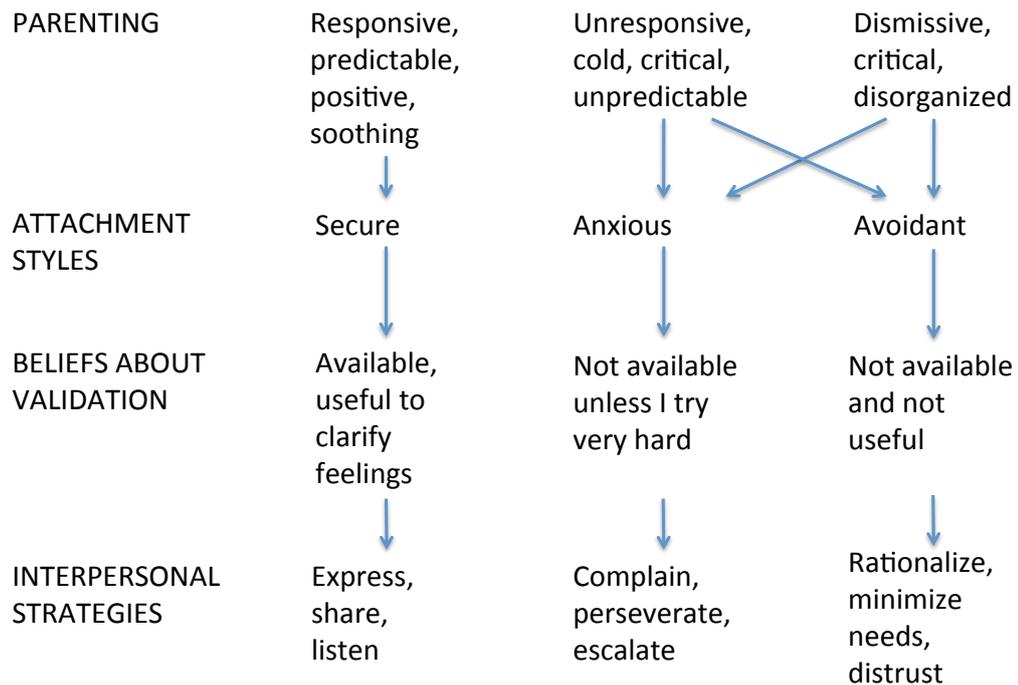
*Safeness via warmth* during infancy is conferred with the soothing, care-giver signals of touching, stroking and holding, voice tone, the "musicality" of the way the mother speaks to her child, affectionate facial expressions, feeding and mutually rewarding interchanges that form the basis of the *attachment bond*.

Thus the *sense of self is sculpted in interaction*, and at the root of this are brains that need others to love and care for them. Many high-shame people find warmth and soothing difficult to do and are fearful and resistant of it - as if this system has been *toned down and suppressed*.

### Validation Seeking

Validation of emotions and early emotional coaching can link to different emotion strategies and relating styles. These styles will emerge in therapy and the therapeutic relationship. When we develop the "compassionate self" and engage in chair work we pay a lot of attention to your ability to be compassionately validating of your feelings and conflicts of feelings.

#### PARENTING, ATTACHMENT STYLES, BELIEFS ABOUT VALIDATION AND INTERPERSONAL STRATEGIES



### Cognitive Abilities

Love and affection are like vitamins to the brain. How a mother understands and responds to her child's emotions and needs is crucial to the child's ability to understand and calm his / her own mind - and that of others. These are vital for metacognitive abilities: to be able to *reflect on our emotions, stand back from them and not be overwhelmed*.

## CLARIFYING THE CFT APPROACH AND PHILOSOPHY

We take a *physiotherapy approach to psychotherapy*: the manifestation of the problem may not be the source of the problem (a back problem may be caused by flat feet or knees that turn inward). If we only focus on trying to change the threat system we may fail to realize that part of the problem is in the *imbalance of the emotion regulation systems* - in particular the *poor output from the soothing system*. *When the soothing system is developed the others can settle down.*

### Evolved Mind

The first reality check is that we are an emergent species in the flow of life - part of mammalian and primate evolution. Our brains are actually difficult and tricky; they are not well designed; we can get stuck in primitive emotions and behaviors. In different mind states we can think and feel quite differently. However, it is only through *training our minds* that we can achieve some harmony within.

### Tragic Mind

The second reality check is that in many ways we live a short and tragic life with much *inevitable pain and suffering*. It is the very real tragedies in our lives that summons up the importance of compassion.



### Social Mind

The third reality check is that we live in a world of immense injustice and suffering. The *social circumstances* of our lives play a huge role in how our brains mature. The "you" in "this life" is only "one version" of many that could have emerged if you had been born in different circumstances.

## From "Not Our Fault" to Taking Responsibility

Much of what goes on in our minds is *not of our design and is therefore not our fault*. Understanding this can play a key role in alleviating feelings of being worthless, useless and not good enough. *We all just find ourselves here, with this difficult brain, created over millions of years of evolution, with genetic dispositions and with a sense of ourselves and various emotional memories obtained through the social circumstances of our lives - none of which we chose.*

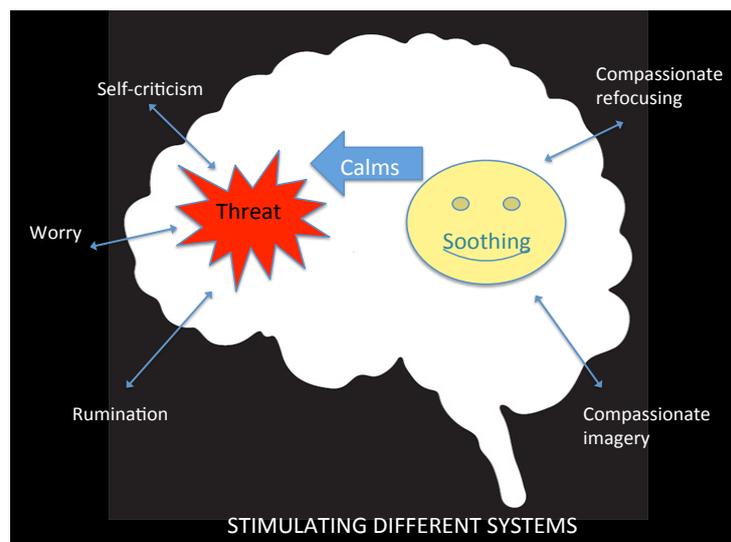
- In CFT we are not so interested in our client's *diagnosis* as we are very interested in *how your threat, excitement and soothing systems are working for you*
- This helps our clients to understand their problems in a more objective, and compassionate way
- You might not be to blame for how your mind is, for the passions, terrors, or rages that flow through it, but *only you can take responsibility for training it for your own and others' happiness*

- It is like a garden; you can leave your garden to grow and it will grow; weeds and flowers will grow but you may not like the tangles that emerge if you leave it to its own devices
- So, cultivating, practicing, and focusing on those elements of our minds that we wish to enhance is key if we are to take control over our minds

### Interactions of New Brain with Old Brain

Attention to the ongoing processes of thoughts, linked to rumination, worry and self-criticism, are important. These processes operate as complex stimulators of the three (old brain) affect regulation systems, activate physiological systems and fuel certain mentalities. For example, feeling put down or disrespected and having angry and vengeful rumination maintains the threat system *and* the competitive mentality; ruminating on lack of love maintains the threat system *and* the care-seeking mentality - a self-perpetuating internal and external feedback loop.

- Attempts to self-regulate fail because they are not linked to the appropriate affect-regulation system
- *It is necessary to stimulate the natural regulator of the threat-protection system - the soothing system, by using compassionate refocusing, imagery and attention*



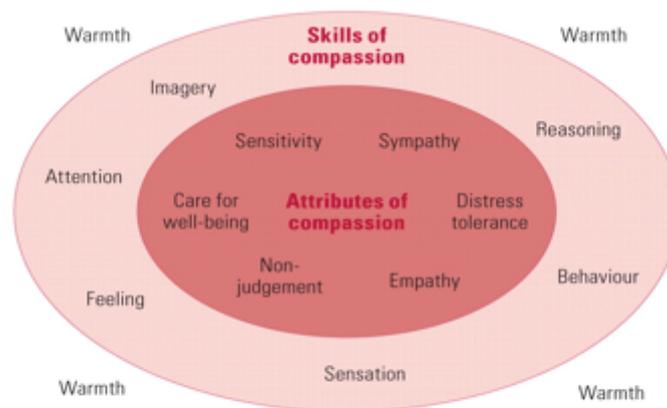
### The Mechanisms of Change

- ❑ To *disengage from the (inner) stimulators of threat*, e.g., ruminative, self-criticalness or anger (shared with metacognitive and mindfulness-based therapies), and refocus on compassion insights and feelings
- ❑ To be able to *compassionately "stand back" from one's inner storms of emotion* and become more "observant and watching" of one's thoughts and feelings "as they arise" rather than caught up in them (as in mindfulness- and acceptance-based therapies) - having a compassion base can help that difficult process
- ❑ To *activate the natural threat regulator in the brain - the soothing system* - by switching to compassionate refocusing and imagery

- ❑ To be able to engage with aversive inner experiences, such as trauma memory, or avoided emotions, by first *developing an inner compassion base*
- ❑ You may have to *make changes in your life*, give up things, come to terms with losses, realign your goals and sense of self, engage with things that frighten you
- ❑ All of this *requires courage*, and developing courage is more likely if you can create kind, helpful and *supportive voices in your head* rather than coldly logical, bullying, critical or pushy ones

## THE NATURE OF COMPASSION

Compassion involves *attributes* ("whats") and *skills* ("how tos"). These enable us to direct our attention compassionately, to think and reason compassionately, and to generate compassionate images and imaginings; to work on creating *a bodily sense of compassion*. Combined, these attributes and skills constitute *the compassionate mind*.



**FIG 2** Multimodal compassionate mind training: the key aspects and attributes of compassion (inner ring) and the skills training required to develop them (outer ring). From Gilbert (2009) with permission of Constable and Robinson.

## An Example

Let's imagine somebody has had a setback like failing at a job interview, or has put on weight; here are some of the *procedures* we might use:

- ❑ *Validate the distress*; you are helped to be sensitive to, and be empathic to your distress (but not self-pitying) before trying to work with it; this is very important because you may try to dismiss it, minimize it, tell yourself to pull yourself together, or be angry that you are not coping
- ❑ You will learn *emotional tolerance and acceptance* without avoidance or "fighting with myself to try to force control"; explore the value of mindfulness
- ❑ Recognize self-criticism as understandable but unhelpful; seeing *behind* the criticism *to the fears and sadnesses*; then developing compassion for those
- ❑ Prepare yourself to engage with the inner distress or self-criticism with your *soothing breathing rhythm*
- ❑ *Refocus attention* on what would be helpful and supportive in this situation, for example bringing to mind memories of previous successes or of people's support, or of your compassionate self or of compassionate images

- ❑ *Imagine your compassionate self dealing with this issue*
- ❑ Recognize (self-critical) rumination as understandable and a common process but *recognize the value of refocusing* on becoming a compassionate self
- ❑ Imagine your compassionate self being compassionate to your self-criticism and the fears and sadnesses that are often part of the self-criticism; engage in rumination for a few moments and then go through the “becoming a compassionate self exercise” and to *note the changes*
- ❑ Explore *how you would speak to a friend* – but spend time enabling you to *feel* what you’re saying rather than just attending to the content
- ❑ Utilize cognitive and *compassionate concepts* such our common humanity, suffering is part of the human condition, depersonalizing, countering black-or-white thinking, overgeneralization, while validating the understandable human tendency to think like that when we feel threatened or distressed
- ❑ Engage with self-criticism using *compassionate chair work*
- ❑ Write a *compassionate letter*
- ❑ Refocus using *compassionate images*; imagine yourself in a dialogue with a compassionate image



## PREPARING AND TRAINING THE MIND

- *Mindfulness* teaches us to become aware of the mind when it wanders and gently, kindly and without judgment or criticism bring it back on task; this “noticing and return, noticing and return...” is a key element of mindfulness

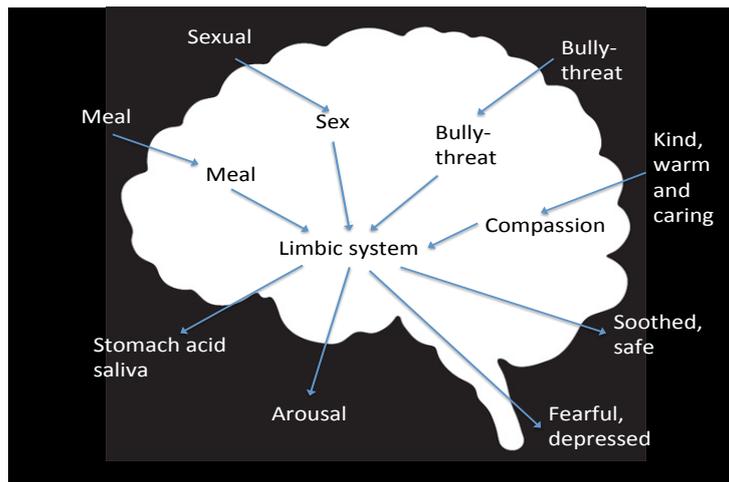
- *Soothing breathing rhythm*, paying attention to slowing down and being

sensitive to the link between bodily feelings and breathing; this will be combined with *relaxation exercises*

## INTRODUCING IMAGERY

The power of imagery is explained and *demonstrated* using simple examples. Imagining a wonderful meal, sexually arousing images, being loved and cared for, being criticized or bullied, memories of sad or traumatic experiences. You need to understand that *thoughts and images can stimulate and can affect parts of the brain* and lead to stressful *or* soothing feelings.

Remember that the techniques of CFT rely on this fact: *EXPERIENCE AND FANTASY WORK THROUGH THE SAME BRAIN SYSTEMS*, as illustrated in the figure below:



## CREATING A SAFE PLACE

- *Guided imagery* can be used to create a safe place, where you can experience safeness and calmness – a beautiful forest, a peaceful beach, a garden
- *Imagine that the place itself takes joy and pleasure in your being there*
- Go through *each sensory modality* (sight, sound, touch, smell) slowly with plenty of space
- *A compassionate color* is sometimes preferred
- Engage in *soothing breathing rhythm* and imagine a color you associate with compassion, warmth and kindness
- Imagine the color *entering through your heart area* and spreading through your body
- Imagine the color having *strength, wisdom, warmth and kindness*
- The color *wants to help you* – its sole intention is to heal you and it wants you to be happy and flourish
- Create a *facial expression of kindness* on your own face as you focus on sensing that intention



## VARIETIES OF COMPASSION FOCUSED IMAGERY

- In developing *the inner compassionate self*, key qualities are wisdom, maturity, insight, understanding, strength, fortitude, courage, authority, warmth, kindness, non-judgmental, but responsible
- Compassion flowing out from you *to others*
- Compassion *to yourself*
- Always begin with *soothing breathing rhythm*
- Imagine *yourself expanding* as if your wisdom is making you bigger, more powerful and mature

- *Imagine yourself being calm and having wisdom, being sensitive, having the ability to tolerate difficulties, being warm and kind, being non-judgmental, wanting to help, relieve suffering, and promote flourishing*
- *Try to create a facial expression of compassion*
- *Pay attention to your body as you bring each part of your compassionate self to the fore*
- *“I care about my pain”*
- *“May I be happy”*
- *“May I be healthy”*
- *“May I be free of suffering”*
- *“May I have a calm, gentle, and loving mind”*



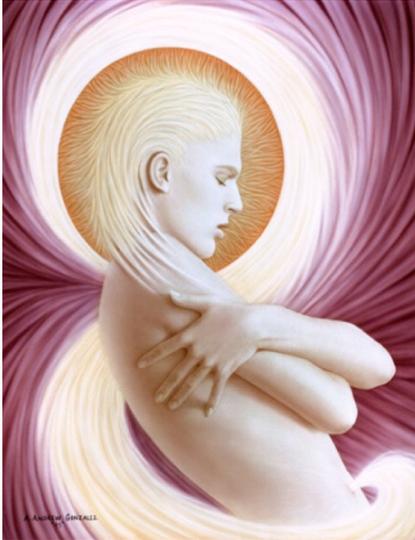
### Compassion Flowing Out

- *Sit quietly and focus on your breathing*
- *Recall a time when you felt very caring and kind towards someone (or an animal)*
- *Pay attention to your body as you create feelings of kindness*
- *Focus on someone you care about, and direct toward them your desire that they be free of suffering and flourish*
- *Keep in mind that it is your intention that is important – and the feelings may follow on behind*
- *“May you be happy”*
- *“May you be healthy”*
- *“May you be free of suffering”*

### Compassion Flowing into Your Self

- *Engage with your soothing breathing rhythm and compassionate expression; bring to mind your safe place, the sounds, the feel, and the sights*
- *This is your place and it delights in your being there*
- *Now create and meet your compassionate image – it may be a divine or human being, a tree, an animal, the sun, or a mountain*
- *The image may appear from mist or the blue sky, or be walking towards you*
- *Your perfect image of a compassionate being has the following qualities:*
- *A deep commitment to you – a desire to help you heal, cope with and relieve your suffering*
- *Wisdom – which comes from understanding that “we all just find ourselves here,” having to cope with a brain we did not design and early life experiences that shaped us that we did not choose, and doing the best we can*

- *Strength of mind* - this being is not overwhelmed by your pain or distress, but remains present, enduring it with you
- *Warmth* – conveyed by kindness, gentleness, caring and openness
- *Acceptance* – never critical or judgmental, and understands your struggles



- Focus on *experiencing what it's like to feel that another being really values you and cares about you unconditionally*
- Your compassionate ideal is looking at you with great *warmth, wishing for you to flourish*
- The key to the experience is not visual clarity, but to *focus on and practice the compassionate feelings*
- Remember that what we are trying to tackle is your own attitudes towards yourself and *your ability to soothe yourself*, thus reducing your dependency on external sources or other people to help you to feel safeness and well-being

### Compassion Under the Duvet

- Try to *practice* “becoming your compassionate self” *each day*
- Start by learning “compassion under the duvet” (or in the bath, or standing at the bus stop)
- As you lie in bed, bring a compassionate expression to your face, focus on your *real desire* to be wise and compassionate; remember inside you, you have the capacity for wisdom and strength, but you have to *create space* for it

### COMPASSIONATE CHAIR WORK

- Many therapies use chairs where different “*parts of the person*” can enact their thoughts and feelings; this can be done in *hypnosis*
- There could be an “angry chair,” and “anxious chair,” or a “self-critical chair”
- The key focus is on the “*compassion chair*” and building up the feelings, tolerance, insights and strengths of this part of the self – “*you at your best*”
- We invite you to sit in the opposite chair and *respond with compassion to the angry or anxious part of your self*
- We use the *soothing breathing rhythm* in the compassion chair, with *mindfulness*

### RE-SCRIPTING

- When working with a *painful memory*, the person holds the compassionate position as they *watch the scene in their mind's eye*
- The *compassionate self can bring new things into the scene* (e.g., helpers) and begin to decide on new endings

- The compassionate self really *controls the working through of this memory* and therefore recognizes its power to do so
- At the same time the therapist may be speaking very gently to the client, acting as a *soothing mentor*, moving into the memory and then back to the compassionate self

