

Compassionate Letter Writing

The idea of compassionate letter writing is to help you **refocus your thoughts and feelings on being supportive, helpful and caring of yourself**. In *practicing* doing this it can help you access an aspect of yourself that can help tone down negative feelings and thoughts.

The key of this exercise is to **practice becoming inwardly gentle, compassionate and self supportive**. It takes time to build this compassionate muscle. You can practice thinking about how, each day, you can become more and more as you wish to be. As in all things there will be good times and not so good. Spend time imagining your postures and facial expressions, thoughts and feelings that go with being compassionate and practice creating these inside you. This means being open with our difficulties and distress, rather than just trying to get rid of them.

To start your letter, try to feel that part of you that can be kind and understanding of others; how you would be if caring for someone you liked. Draw upon your “compassionate image”.

As you write your letter, try to allow yourself to have *understanding and acceptance* for your distress. For example, your letter might start with “I am sad you feel distressed; your distress is understandable because.....” Note the reasons; realizing your distress makes sense. Then perhaps you could continue your letter with... “I would like you to know that.....” (e.g., your letter might point out that as we become depressed, our depression can come with a powerful set of thoughts and feelings – so how you see things right now may be the depression view on things).

Consider the following when writing your letter:

Standing Back: Once you have acknowledged your distress and not blamed yourself for it, it is useful if your letter can help you stand back from the distress of your situation for a moment. If you could do that, what would be helpful for you to focus on and attend to?

Not alone: When we feel distressed we can often feel that we are different in some way. However, rather than feeling alone and ashamed remember many others can feel depressed with negative thoughts about themselves, the world or their future.

Reduce Self criticism: If you are feeling down, disappointed or are being harsh on yourself, note in your letter that self criticism is often triggered by disappointment, loss or fear. So we need to acknowledge and be understanding and compassionate about the disappointment, loss or fear. Allow yourself to be sensitive to those feelings.

Compassionate behavior: It is useful to think about what might be the compassionate thing *to do* at this moment or at some time ahead – how might your compassionate part help you do those things? So in your letter you may want to think about how you can bring compassion into action in your life. If there are things you are avoiding or finding difficult to do, write down some small steps to move you forward. Try to write down steps and ideas that encourage you and support you to do the things that you might find difficult.

Dilemmas: If you are in a dilemma about something, focus on the gentle compassionate voice inside you and write down the different sides of the dilemma. Note that dilemmas are often difficult, and at times there are hard choices to be made. Therefore, these may take time to work through. Talking through with others might be a helpful thing to do. Acceptance of the benefits and losses of a decision can take time.

Compassion for feelings: Your compassionate side will have compassion for your feelings. If you are having powerful feelings of frustration, anger or anxiety, then compassionately recognize these. Negative emotions are part of being human and can become more powerful in depression or when we are distressed but they do not make you a bad person – just a human being trying to cope with difficult feelings. Your compassionate mind will remind you that we often don't choose to feel negatively and these feelings can come quite quickly. In this sense it is 'not our fault', although we can learn how to work with these difficult feelings and take responsibility.

What is helpful: Your letter will be a way of practicing how to really focus on things that you feel help you. If thoughts come to mind that make you feel worse, then notice them, let them go and refocus on what might be helpful – remember there are no 'I should's'.

Warmth: Now try to focus of the feelings of warmth and genuine wish to help in the letter as you write it. Spend time breathing gently and really try, as best you can, to let feelings of warmth be there for you. When you have written your letter, read it through slowly, with as much warmth as you can muster. If you were writing to somebody else would you feel your letter is kind and helpful? Could you change anything to make it more warm and helpful?