

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 *practising* doing this it can help you access an aspect of yourself that can help tone down negative feelings and thoughts.

There is now good research showing that expressive writing can be very helpful to people. Indeed, many of us write diaries from time to time – noting our thoughts and feelings. Writing about experiences can help us to come to terms with them. Learning to write to ourselves from a *compassionate perspective* can be really helpful. We deliberately try to create that frame of mind. There are different ways you can write this letter, here we will explore writing as your compassionate self and as your ideal compassionate other.

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 like? Consider your general manner, facial expressions, voice tone and feelings that come with your caring self. Think about that part of you as the type of self you would like to be. Think about the qualities you would like your compassionate self to have. It does not matter if you feel *you are* like this – but focus on the *ideal* you would like to be. Spend a few moments really thinking about this and trying to feel in contact with that ‘kind’ part of you.

It is a good idea to listen to a compassionate imagery practice, such as Soothing Colour, Place of Calm, Compassionate Self or Ideal Compassionate Other practice, prior to starting to write your compassionate letter.

Compassionate Letter Writing Examples

Below are two examples which may help you when starting to write compassionate letters.

Letter writing using your compassionate self:

Claire had suffered a real setback when her partner of three years sadly walked out on her unexpectedly and she discovered he had been having an affair at work. On top of this, having never voiced dissatisfaction before, he blamed her completely. She felt devastated and also began to feel that maybe it was her fault, she should have seen it coming, maybe she was unlovable, and then when she became mildly depressed and very tearful she felt she wasn't coping and other people went through these things without falling apart as she was. When Claire had to take time off work she beat herself up even more for letting people at work down. However, Claire was able to write to herself from a compassionate point of view. At first she imagined she was writing to somebody else – maybe a friend who had gone through exactly the

same difficulty. Later she began to think about writing for herself. Here are some of the themes that she wrote about.

Writing as your compassionate self example:

'Dear me

What I've been through is terrible and would be terrible for anyone. It's very understandable why I feel like I feel - it's going to take me time to adjust to this shock –that's it - I'm in shock actually. It affects my whole body – all my emotions are just thrown in the air – my thoughts never stop. But that's not because there's anything wrong with me, that's what happens in situations like this – they are painful and difficult. It is compassionate if I learn to accept this rather than fight with myself about my feelings and what I should and shouldn't feel. This is hard because this is hard. (Remember that Claire needs to hear this with a kind, understanding, gentle tone in her mind)

When I think about it, people at work have been genuinely understanding and very kind. They realise that I need time to work through things and, sure it's inconvenient for them, but I know I would do the same for somebody else. It would help me if I allow myself to experience their kindness rather than keep focusing on my guilt. The more I think about it I can understand why Richard blamed me because he was one of those people that always blamed somebody else if things went wrong for him. I'm not really doing him any favours or me if I simply go along with that.

There may be things to learn from this – maybe I was a little gullible and dependent, and that's not my fault and it's not my fault somebody exploited that. However, I have an opportunity now to work through this and think about how I would like to be in the future.'

Writing using our Ideal Compassionate Other Image

A second way of writing compassionate letters to yourself is to imagine your compassionate image writing to you, imagining a dialogue with them, and what they will say to you. Remember, sometimes people don't have much of an image so it's just sensing your image with you, focused on your well-being and recognising the nature of the difficulty you are struggling with. Imagine the sound of the voice or any communication that comes from them as wise, strong, with great warmth and kindness, never judgment, always understanding and looking for the helpful way forward.

For example, here's a letter from the compassionate image of someone we'll call Sally, about lying in bed feeling depressed. Before looking at this letter let's note an important point. In this

letter we refer to 'you' rather than 'I'. Some people like to write their letters like that, as if writing to someone else. See what works for you.

Writing as your ideal compassionate other image example:

'Good morning Sally,

Last few days have been tough for you so no wonder you want to hide away in bed. Sometimes we just get to the point of shutdown, don't we, and the thought of taking on things is overwhelming. You know you have been trying really hard but have felt exhausted through no fault of your own, I mean you haven't put your feet up with a gin and tonic and the daily paper.

I guess the thing now is to work out what helps you. You've shown a lot of courage in the past in pushing yourself to do things that you find difficult. Remember you can lie in bed if you think that it can help you, of course, but watch out for critical Sally who could be critical about this, and give you a hard time.

Also you often feel better if you get up, as tough as it is. What about a cup of tea? You often like that first cup of tea in the morning. Okay, so why don't you slowly get out of bed, move around a bit and get going and then see how you feel. It might be tough, but let's give it a try...'

So you see the point here: It's about understanding, being helpful, having a really caring focus, but at the same time working on what we need to do to help ourselves. Imagine a really kind and understanding person talking with you.

Getting started

Keep in mind all the time that the *emotional tone* that you hear the words in should be warm, kind, gentle, understanding and wise – *that is compassionate* – keep a focus on the emotion all the time.

There is nothing rushed in letter writing – just take your time. We find that sometimes people sit staring at a blank page not sure what to write because they're 'over thinking' in their heads of 'what to write'; how to write or worried about spelling – or telling themselves they can't write. This is the evaluative mind trying to work it all out in advance. There is no right or wrong here and you might have a number of starts before you get into the flow of it.

So it is useful to start with:

"Dear (your name), I know you have been feeling....." and then almost let the pen write itself.

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, realising 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). Given this, we can try and ‘step to the side of the depression’ and write and focus on how best to cope, and what is helpful.

Just write what you would really like somebody who’s really kind and understanding to say to you. If you’re struggling with the flow just write whatever comes into your mind. The key here will be to try to work around a tendency to self monitor and judge if you’re doing it right or not – that judging can make it more difficult for you. Just write – you can always throw it away if you don’t like it and you can have as many go’s as you want. It’s useful to just start writing regardless of whether or not you know what you’re going to write – in fact, in many ways, it’s a good idea *not* to work it out in advance.

Guide to your letter writing

When you have written your first few compassionate letters, go through them with an open mind and think whether they actually capture compassion for you. If they do, then see if you can spot the following qualities in your letter.

- It expresses concern and genuine caring.
- It is sensitive to your distress and needs.
- It is sympathetic and responds emotionally to your distress.
- It helps you to face your feelings and become more tolerant of them.
- It helps you become more understanding and reflective of your feelings, difficulties and dilemmas.
- It is non-judgemental/non-condemning.
- A genuine sense of warmth, understanding and caring permeates the whole letter.
- It helps you think about the behaviour you may need to adopt in order to get better.

People who tend to be self-critical can struggle with this to begin with. Their letters tend to be rather full of finger-wagging advice. We have to work at this and practise. The point of these letters is not just to focus on difficult feelings but to help you *reflect on your feelings and thoughts, be open with them, and develop a compassionate and balanced way of working with them*. The letters should not offer advice or tell you what you should or shouldn’t do. It is not the advice you need, *but the support to act on it*.