

## More ideas when writing compassionate letters

There are a number of ideas that you might consider in your letter. Do **not** feel you have to cover them all. In fact you might want to try different things in different letters to yourself. With all of these ideas, although it can be difficult, try to avoid telling yourself what you should or should not think, feel or do. There is no right or wrong, it is the process of trying to think in a different way that is important.

**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?

For example, you might think about how you would feel about the situation in a couple of days, weeks or months, or you might recall that the depression can lift at certain times and remember how you feel then. It can be helpful to recall in your letter, and bring to your attention, times that you have coped with difficulties before, and try to bring those to mind. Your letter can focus on your efforts and on what you *are* able to do.

Your compassionate side might gently help you see things in a less black and white way. Your compassionate side is never condemning and will help you reduce self-blaming.

Remember your compassionate side will help you with kindness and understanding. Here are some examples: If someone has shunned you and you are upset by that, your compassionate side will help you recognise your upset but also that thoughts such as 'the person doesn't like me, or that I am therefore unlikeable,' maybe very unfair. Perhaps a more balanced view would be the person who shunned you can do this to others and has difficulties of their own; your compassionate side can remind you that you have other friends who don't treat you this way.

As another example if you have forgotten to do something, or have made a mistake and are very frustrated and cross with yourself, your compassionate side will understand your frustration and anger but help you see that the mistake was a genuine mistake and is not evidence of being stupid or useless. It will help you think about what is the most compassionate and helpful thing to do in these circumstances.

**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. In fact around 1 in 3 or 4 of us will experience depression in our lifetime. Your depression is **not** a personal weakness, inadequacy, badness or failure.

**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 (e.g., making a mistake or not looking like we would like to), loss (e.g. of hopes for love) or fear (e.g. of criticism and/or rejection). Maybe being self-critical is a way you have learned to cope with these things or take your frustration out on yourself, but this is not a kind or supportive thing to do. Understandable perhaps, but it does not help us deal with the 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 behaviour:** 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. If you are unsure what to do, maybe try to brain storm as many options as you can and think which ones appeal to you. Could you ask others for help?

**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 recognise 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. We can learn to work with these feelings as part of our ‘humanness’ without blaming or condemning ourselves for them. 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.

**Loss of positive feelings:** If you are feeling bad because you have lost positive feelings then we can be compassionate to this loss – it is very sad to lose positive feelings. Sometimes we lose loving feelings because a relationship has run its course, or we are just exhausted, or depression can block positive emotion systems. As we recover from the depression these positive systems can return. Your compassionate letter can help you see this without self blaming.

**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’ or ‘I must’.

**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?

Remember that this is an *exercise* that might seem difficult to do at times but with practice you are exercising a part of your mind that can be developed to be helpful to you. Some people find that they can rework their letters the next day so they can think through things in a different way.

The key of this exercise is the desire and effort of becoming inwardly gentle, compassionate and self supportive. The benefits of this work may not be immediate but like ‘exercising to get fit’ can emerge over time with continued practice. Sometimes people find that even though they are depressed they would very much like to develop a sense of self that can be wise and compassionate to both themselves and others.

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.