



Building Self-Compassion

Module 4

Compassionate Imagery

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Introduction

We are now ready for some compassion! So far we have been setting the scene for self-compassion. Through your attention retraining exercises you should now be more aware when you are going through a difficult experience and are in need of some compassion, and ideally you can now mentally step back enough to be in a position to provide this for yourself. You can also slow yourself down, by using your breathing to create a calming physical state that is conducive to being compassionate towards yourself. But how do you actually send some compassion your way?

This module will teach you some novel strategies for being able to further the work that your slow breathing will have started. That is, to further activate your soothe system, by stimulating compassionate feelings within you. Triggering compassionate feelings within you will rely on developing your very own compassionate image. The goal of these modules will be to find a compassionate image that works for you in unlocking compassionate feelings. These feelings can then be directed towards yourself when you most need them.

Why Use Imagery?

You may be wondering what we mean by an *image*, and why *imagery* would be used to stimulate compassionate feelings? We think in images all the time, often without even realising it. Below is a list of words. As you read each one pause before moving to the next and notice what is triggered off in your mind by each word:

Beach
Flower
Bicycle
Holidays
Apple

What did you notice? Chances are that certain pictures flashed through your mind, in other words images popped into your head. For the word 'beach', it may have been a memory of childhood holidays at a particular beach, or an imagined tropical beach paradise that you haven't as yet visited, or your local beach that you go to regularly, or a less pleasant beach image may have come to mind, like something treacherous and dangerous. It may have been a sustained picture almost like a movie playing in your head, or just brief flashes and glimpses that passed through your mind. It may not have just been a picture image either. For some of us the image might be multisensory where you can almost hear what the wave's sound like, or smell the salt air, or feel the cool water or warmth of the sun on your skin.



Hopefully you get a sense that images are not that unusual, they are just a form of thinking that is very rich in terms of sensory information (i.e., visual pictures, sounds, touch sensations, tastes, smells). But, why use imagery?



Research shows that imagery can be very powerful in triggering emotions. Our brain is not very good at distinguishing an image from reality, so it will often process and respond to an image, as if it is something occurring for real. As an example, think of a food that you really love...in my case it would be chocolate cake!

Now close your eyes and imagine that you have that food in front of you. Imagine getting up close and having a smell of it...what do you notice...how do you feel...do you notice any physical sensations...how does your mouth feel?

Many people notice they have a physical reaction when they imagine their desired food, often noticing that their mouth even starts to salivate! That is because our brain is processing the image and responding to it as if the food were really in front of us.

But what do images of chocolate cake have to do with self-compassion? To build self-compassion we need to first stimulate compassionate feelings, and then direct those feelings towards ourselves when we are struggling. If we know that images are a really effective way to activate feelings, then let's be strategic and use this knowledge to our advantage. With this in mind, if we can find an image that elicits compassionate feelings within us, we can use this as a tool to help direct compassion towards ourselves.

Our aim is to develop an image that triggers a compassionate attitude or mindset within us – prompting us to feel, think and act in compassionate ways. We will now look at two types of compassionate images that may work for you. We would recommend having a go at each imagery exercise, trying each image 'on for size', and seeing which is most effective for triggering feelings of compassion within you. The following exercises are adapted from Paul Gilbert's Compassion Focused Therapy approach.

Imagine Giving Compassion

See if you can bring to mind someone you care about, someone that you feel great warmth towards, someone that you always want to be there for unconditionally, to be on their side supporting them through the trials of life. This could be a family member, or a friend, or even a pet.

Write down the name of the person that springs to mind _____

Close your eyes and go through a few rounds of your slow breathing to get yourself prepared. Now imagine that this special person is in front of you and that they need your help. Don't get caught up in the details of what is happening for the other person, instead just focus on giving them the unwavering compassion that they need. Allow yourself to feel a deep sense of caring and concern for them. Allow your desire for them to be happy and free from struggle to come to the forefront.



Now notice what emotions are you feeling? Notice what physical sensations accompany those feelings? What is your facial expression like towards this other person? What is your body posture like towards the other person? What things are you saying to them? What is your tone of voice like as you say those things? What are you doing to comfort and help this person?

Spend a few minutes just appreciating this image of giving compassion to another. Pay particular attention to the compassionate feelings this image generates. See if you can allow these feelings to take over, to grow inside you, almost feeling your whole body fill with compassion. When you open your eyes, fill in the following details regarding what you experienced.

Emotions: _____

Physical Sensations: _____

Facial Expression: _____

Body Posture: _____

Advice: _____

Voice Tone: _____

Actions: _____

If you found this exercise useful in triggering feelings of compassion within you, then practice bringing this image to mind regularly, so that the image becomes easily accessible and can be used as your compassion 'on' button. You could even carry a photo of this person with you, in your phone or printed in your wallet, as a visual reminder. You could even frame a photo of them and place it somewhere in your daily life where you notice you tend to be your most self-critical (e.g., next to your bathroom mirror if you notice you tend to criticise your appearance a lot).

If you found that the compassionate feelings weren't very strong, or that it was difficult to come up with an image that works for you, it may mean that you need more practice to strengthen this image. If feelings unrelated to compassion popped up (e.g., sadness, guilt, longing, regret, anger, loss, loneliness, etc.), then either you may need to pick a different person to direct your compassion to, or maybe this isn't the most helpful method for you for generating compassionate feelings. Don't worry, the next option might be more useful for you.

Creating the Ultimate Compassionate Image

Relationships are complicated, and some of us may not have people in our life who we feel pure compassion towards, hence it is hard for us to really benefit from the imagery exercise we have just covered. If this is the case, then the previous image may not be effective in triggering pure untainted compassion, which is really what we are looking for.

Because of this, we often find that this imagery exercise is more useful, as it involves creating your very own ultimate compassionate image from your imagination. This fantasy compassionate image can be whatever you want. There is no right or wrong when it comes to creating your own personalised image that represents pure compassion. In fact, the actual image you develop is irrelevant. It doesn't matter how fanciful or realistic the image is. Remember, we are just using this image to activate feelings of pure compassion within us, so whatever image achieves this aim is okay.



Start by closing your eyes and slowing your breath as you are now very familiar with...

Now, when you think of compassion notice what images, thoughts or feelings arise in you? Don't try too hard, just allow whatever is there to be there, or allow things to come and go as they please...

Now allow an image to arise that represents compassion for you. Take your time to develop an image that symbolises all the things that go with compassion. If nothing comes immediately, that's ok, just take your time and see what emerges no matter how strange it may seem. It doesn't have to be a vivid picture, just a felt sense of the image is ok too. If numerous images come up (a bit like a slide show), that's ok too, we can see which one you settle on as time goes on.

See if you can start to develop an image that holds warm feelings towards you...

Allow an image that conveys a sense of understanding for you, for your struggles and your feelings...

Allow an image that shows kindness, care and concern for your well-being...

Allow an image that is strong and wise as it supports you...

Allow an image that is completely accepting of you just as you are...

Building Self-Compassion

Now, notice if the image is of a person or not, something real or imagined, an animal, some other being or an aspect of nature. Is it young or old? Male or female? What colours or light are associated with it? How does this image make you feel? What physical sensations in your body go with these feelings? What facial expression does the image display towards you? What body posture or stature does it convey towards you? How does it sound or communicate with you? What things does it say to you? What tone does it use? What does it do to help or comfort you?

When you feel ready you can let go of the image and open your eyes.

Now have a go at describing your ultimate compassionate image below in words and/or pictures.

My Ultimate Compassionate Image is...(describe in words and/or draw a picture)

Also below note the various experiences that went with this image. How did the image make you feel emotionally and what physical sensations did the image generate within you? What facial expression and body posture/stature did the image convey? What sorts of advice was the image giving? What voice tone did the image use? What comforting actions did the image offer?

Emotions: _____

Physical Sensations: _____

Facial Expression: _____

Body Posture/Stature: _____

Advice: _____

Voice Tone: _____

Actions: _____

When people do this exercise, some automatically bring to mind religious figures or a wise grandparent who is no longer with them. Keep in mind that for the compassionate image to be truly compassionate, you need to feel that you could tell it your deepest darkest secrets, thoughts, desires and feelings, and that they would not judge you, they would not turn away from you, but instead would accept you unconditionally. If your image has a judgemental bone in its body or it conjures up feelings other than compassion, then try the imagery exercise again and shop around for a different image.

Creating your ultimate compassionate image will typically take a few attempts. Try to treat this as a creative and fun process. Some people will easily stumble on an image that works for them straight away, but then when they repeatedly bring the image to mind, it might evolve and change as more detail is added to enrich the image. Others may struggle to settle on a specific image at the start, and they might try a few different images on for size before settling on one that works for them. It is ok for this to be a work in progress that takes some time to fully develop.

My compassionate image is of a large rock, almost a mini-mountain emerging from a beautiful pool of calm ocean water. My rock is indented at the top with mossy soft grass, the perfect size to curl up in and be supported and comforted, and at the same time standing on the rock looking out gives a sense of strength and security. I know other people who have developed images of a wise tree that has been standing for hundreds of years, with sprawling warm green foliage that provides shelter and protection. Others have created a very wise old woman or man, not someone from real life but a fantasy person, who has experienced all of life and provides unconditional care and support. Others have an animal as their compassionate image, for example a steadfast beautiful stallion that is always on their side. Hopefully from these examples you can see there is no right or wrong, just your imagination and what works for you in triggering feelings of compassion.



My Compassionate Image

By now you have tried two different compassionate images on for size. It is now time to pick the one that fits best for you and be clear about how you are going to strengthen this image, so that it can be used as an effective and efficient compassion 'on' button when you need it. So first write down which of the two images you want to use as your compassionate image. Is it your fantasy ultimate compassionate image or is it imagining that special person in your life that you have unconditional compassion for. The choice is yours.

My Compassionate Image is _____

Now note how you will practice this image. When will you bring it to mind? How often will you do this? For how long will you do this?

For now, try to bring this image to mind regularly, daily, and at times when you aren't struggling. That is, when you aren't in threat mode, but instead when you are relatively calm. Once you have strengthened this image and it is effective in sparking compassionate feelings within you, you will then be in a better position to use it to do the same thing during tough times when we are experiencing emotional pain. Also, regardless of which image you have chosen, always remember to start your imagery practice with a few rounds of slow breathing to get you in the mood for compassion.

I will practice my Compassionate Image (*when/how often/how long*) _____

Finding other ways to elaborate this image can also be very useful in strengthening the image. By elaborate we mean doing more than just closing your eyes and bringing it to mind, but finding other ways to make it a part of your life and be regularly reminded of it. This can involve drawing or painting the image, or finding pictures that represent the image. These can then be carried with you or placed in strategic places so you see them regularly and when you most need it. Some people find a song that reminds them of their image, and they play the song regularly as a ring tone on their phone or an alarm wake-up call. Some people find objects that represent the image, like an ornament or piece of jewellery (e.g., pendants, a ring, etc.), to be very useful reminders that can be on hand at any time.

I will elaborate my Compassionate Image by _____

Compassionate Communication

In addition to developing an image that is effective in stimulating compassionate feelings within you, what else did you learn from the two imagery exercises you took part in? Each exercise asked you to reflect on the emotions, physical sensations, facial expression, body posture, advice, voice tone and actions that tended to accompany compassion. What did you notice across these two exercises about each of these elements? Did there tend to be some similarities?

Particularly what was the common facial expression, body posture and voice tone when someone was being compassionate?

Facial Expression: _____

Body Posture: _____

Voice Tone: _____

People will often note that compassion is accompanied by a soft attentive half-smile; a calm, shoulders-back, head-up stance whilst offering a caring touch; and a warm gentle tone of voice.

When we genuinely feel compassion we will naturally display these things. However, the reverse can also be true. Research shows that purposely adopting certain facial expressions, body postures and voice tones can have a big impact on how we feel. So these things can be signs that we are naturally in compassion mode, or can be purposely adopted to switch us into compassion mode when we need it.

Deliberately making the point to adopt a compassionate facial expression, body posture and voice tone more often in everyday life is another way we can build and enhance the compassionate side of ourselves. So the next time you are just walking down the street, walking about your house, or looking at yourself in the mirror, purposely adopt a compassionate facial, body and voice style, choosing to operate like a compassionate person to everyone (and that includes yourself), and projecting this stance to the world around you.

In essence, sometimes you may need to start by pretending to be compassionate in your outward appearance, and with enough practice, true feelings of compassion may then grow within you.

Module Summary

- Your soothe system has already been activated via your slow breathing practice. However, developing a compassionate image that is capable of stimulating compassionate feelings within you can take this a step further.
- Images are not that unusual, they are just a form of thinking that is very rich in terms of sensory information (i.e., visual pictures, sounds, touch sensations, tastes, smells).
- Research shows that imagery can be very powerful in triggering emotions. Here we want to use imagery to trigger feelings of compassion.
- Two options for developing an image that triggers compassionate feelings are: 1) imagining giving compassion to another person you care deeply about, or 2) creating your own ultimate compassionate image. Give both a try to see which works for you.
- Once you have a compassionate image, it is important to practice it regularly and elaborate it to make it a part of your daily life. This way it will become a very effective tool for switching compassionate feelings on when you most need them.
- Don't forget to always start your compassionate image with a few rounds of slow breathing first, to set the scene for some compassion.
- Also remember that pretending to be compassionate on the outside via your facial expression, body language and tone of voice, can sometimes trigger feelings of compassion inside.



Coming up next ...

In Module 5, we will look at how to let these compassionate feelings influence how you think...

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Compassion Focused Therapy, which is an extension of and adjunct to Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy. These modules particularly draw on the work of Paul Gilbert and Kristen Neff.

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These are some of the professional references that informed the development of modules in this information package.

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“BUILDING SELF-COMPASSION”

This module forms part of:

Saulsman, L., Campbell, B., & Sng, A. (2017). *Building Self-Compassion: From Self-Criticism to Self-Kindness*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 9780987547903

Created: March 2017