



Well@Work Podcast

Episode 8: Self-Compassion and Secondary Traumatic Stress

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. On this episode of the podcast, visiting professor Dr. Ruth Gottfried discusses how self-compassion can help mitigate symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. And now, Dr. Ruth Gottfried.

Hello, I'm Dr. Ruth Gottfried, and I'm a dance movement therapist, as well as a faculty member at the Davide Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem, Israel, where I also co-direct one of the college's MD programs. In addition, I am a visiting professor here at the University of Kentucky's Center on Trauma and Children. Welcome to today's Well@Work podcast, focusing on self-compassion as a way of protecting ourselves from the occupational hazard of secondary traumatic stress. On a personal note, compassion is the guiding force that has motivated me to actively dedicate myself to the well-being of children and youth who have suffered trauma, as well as to the professional quality of life of the compassionate professionals caring for them. Self-compassion on the other hand, has helped me improve my own professional quality of life by proactively increasing my resilience to secondary traumatic stress, which is a condition characterized by a natural, yet disruptive reaction; mimicking post-traumatic stress disorder that professional caregivers may experience from being repeatedly, indirectly exposed to their clients' trauma.

The Dalai Lama defines compassion as an "Aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering." He further states that compassion is not passive, "It's not empathy alone but rather an empathic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering." Relatedly, self-compassion involves being touched by one's own suffering, wishing to alleviate one's own suffering, and actively treating oneself with warmth and concern. Self-compassion, which luckily is a teachable skill, is further conceptualized as having three components. The first is treating ourselves with kindness and understanding when we think we've failed or made a mistake. The second is seeing our own suffering as part of our common humanity, which entails recognizing that life isn't always perfect. And the third is allowing ourselves to experience our feelings mindfully, including unwanted feelings, without avoiding or suppressing them.

Scientific research demonstrates a strong relationship between self-compassion and decreased psychopathology, which includes decreased stress. Self-compassion is also associated with increased resilience to stress, which includes an enhanced ability to cope with stressful situations, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and secondary traumatic stress. Relatedly self-compassionate tendencies are also correlated with less professional burnout. Additional benefits of being self-compassionate are increased levels of empathic concern, altruism, optimism, emotional intelligence, personal initiative, existential and spiritual sense of connectedness, and life satisfaction. Moreover, self-compassion promotes health-related benefits such as exercising, seeking medical treatment when needed, and sticking to one's diet.

Indeed, self-compassion is an all-in-one self-care package. Also, unlike other self-care activities, it's possible to engage in self-compassion practices anywhere and at any time, including while you're actively caregiving. This self-compassion and self-care can be as simple as acknowledging a situation as emotionally challenging and stressful, reminding yourself that it's part of human nature to struggle, and offering yourself kindness and care at that moment. For example, saying to yourself "this is challenging

for me right now, it's only natural that I'm feeling stressed, I'm going to take a deep breath at this moment.”

Relatedly, the Dalai Lama says “For someone to develop genuine compassion towards others, first he or she must have a basis upon which to cultivate compassion, and that basis is the ability to connect to one's own feelings and to care for one's own welfare ... caring for others requires caring for oneself.”

Here's a recommended self-compassion tip offered by Dr. Kristin Neff, a pioneer in the field of self-compassion. This tip called a soothing touch, it's relevant for dealing with secondary traumatic stress, as well as with a wide array of additional challenges. As a dance movement therapist, I especially like this surprisingly simple, natural, mind-body way of caring for and comforting ourselves. Dr. Neff points out that touch is a physical gesture that activates our parasympathetic nervous system and helps us feel safe, just like a baby cradled and cuddled in its mother's arms. The soothing touch self-compassion exercise that I am about to share with you is also a way of reminding yourself of your own personal physical borders or boundaries. This is relevant as one of the risk factors for the trauma transfer involved in secondary traumatic stress is empathic enmeshment. Empathic enmeshment signifies becoming so overwhelmed by and over-involved with the trauma experienced by others that one has difficulty in separating one's own personal feelings from their feelings, to the extent that a loss or blurring of personal borders or boundaries occurs. So, here goes.

Start by taking a few deep breaths. And you can also close your eyes, if that's comfortable for you.

Gently place your hand over your heart, noticing the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand or hands if you wish.

With each inhalation and exhalation,

Notice the gentle rising and falling of your chest. And just linger with that feeling for as long as you wish.

Other options are to do the same thing with your hand on your abdomen, with one hand on your abdomen and one over your heart, or by crossing your arms and giving yourself a gentle hug. And by the way, including self-affirmations or acknowledgements, such as “You're doing the best that you can,” “It's going to be okay,” or “It's all right sweetheart” are highly recommended as well.

Please visit Dr. Neff's website, where you'll find a treasure trove of self-compassion practices that are all applicable for proactively increasing your resilience to secondary traumatic stress. And remember, self-compassion is not self-indulgent or selfish. It's putting on your own oxygen mask first, so that you can continue to serve others. For more resources, check out the video description for a link to our website. And remember to stay well at work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.