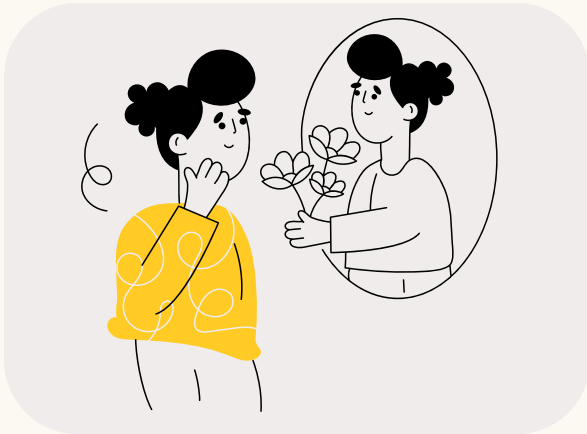


## Cultivating Self-Compassion (ii): The ACT of Self-Compassion

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In our previous article, we delved into the common misconceptions surrounding self-compassion. To recap, self-compassion means treating ourselves with the same kindness, gentleness, care and understanding that we would offer to a good friend in challenging times.

We explored how, contrary to popular belief, self-compassion is not self-indulgence or weakness. Nor is it self-centeredness and self-pity. It is actually a powerful tool for fostering resilience and emotional well-being. Understanding these misconceptions is crucial. It lays the groundwork for embracing the true essence of self-compassion.

Now that we've cleared up these misconceptions, it's time to dive deeper into the heart of the matter: the practice of self-compassion. In this article, we will explore practical ways to integrate self-compassion into our daily lives. Through using the **ACT approach** in two scenarios, we'll discover how self-compassion can transform our relationship with ourselves and help us navigate life's challenges with greater grace and empathy.

Practising self-compassion when we run into tough situations is not second nature to us. Our instinctive reactions would be to criticise ourselves, deny, suppress or dismiss our pain. These coping mechanisms are not only ineffective, they are detrimental. They amplify our suffering, increase feelings of isolation, and hinder our ability to address the challenges constructively.

The practice of self-compassion is the way to go. Cultivating the skill takes time. We begin with familiarising ourselves with the 3 core-components of this practice. The acronym is ACT.

We shall use the first scenario of John's exclusion from an after-office party to demonstrate the ACT approach of self-compassion.

### Scenario 1

John's instinctive reaction to being excluded would be one of anger. He is likely to feel insulted and offended. This exclusion has caused him a 'loss of face'. He is angry at being humiliated. This may lead to him venting his anger on whoever comes his way. He may yell at his wife, raise his voice at his kids when he returns home, often leaving a trail of destruction behind him.

This need not be the case if John knows the ACT approach to practising self-compassion. **A stands for 'acknowledging his feelings, thoughts, pain and suffering.'** If John practises A, he will be aware of the knot in his stomach and his increased heart rate. He pays attention to his bodily sensations and the rush of emotions that bubble up from within. He tells himself, "I must give myself a safe space to attend to myself."

John gives himself the chance to be aware of what's happening within himself and connect with them, not allowing the self-critic to take control or the self-protector to do his usual work. John, recognises each feeling, identifies, labels, fully feeling each emotion; sadness, rejection, betrayal, loneliness, self-doubt and accepts them without judgement, without any agenda to get rid of them.

**C stands for 'connecting with common humanity.'** Being excluded evokes feelings of isolation. If John reminds himself that feeling excluded is a common human experience in a fallen world, he connects with others that experience similar struggles. While this does not alleviate his pain, it can make him feel less alone and his pain becomes less overwhelming.

John moves on to the **T component; 'treating Yourself with care and kindness.'** Instead of being harsh and critical, John does not only connect with his pain of rejection, betrayal and isolation, he speaks empathetically and kindly to himself, "This is so hard for you. It brings about so much humiliation."

He reminds himself that his worth is not determined by social invitations. Just as being invited does not change his worth, not being invited should not also. He offers himself words of reassurance and self-love. He may then treat himself to a relaxing evening or enjoy a comforting meal as an act of kindness towards himself. He may want to take constructive actions such as speaking calmly to a trusted colleague to gain clarity about the situation and expressing his desire to be included if the opportunity presents itself.

### Scenario 2

Let's look at using the ACT approach in another scenario. Jane accidentally sent an important email to the wrong client. She would immediately feel a surge of panic as she realised her mistake. A ton of self-condemnation would come down hard on her. She may then resort to either trying to undo or cover up her mistake. Very often this only makes the situation worse.

If Sarah practises the ACT approach to self-compassion, she takes a moment to breathe deeply. She allows herself to (A) acknowledge and connect with her feelings of anxiety and self-criticism, the sensations of tightness in her chest and her heart palpitations without trying to push them away.

Sarah steps outside of her own experience and (C) connects with common fallen humanity. She reminds herself that everyone makes mistakes at work. She thinks about how errors are opportunities for growth and learning. By recognising that she is not alone in her experience and accepting that imperfection is a part of being human, Sarah gains the right perspective about her experience.

In practising (T), Sarah speaks kindly to herself, offering words of reassurance, "It is natural for you to be anxious and panicky." "You want the best for the company." She reminds herself that one mistake does not define her abilities or worth. Sarah can then decide to take constructive steps to address the mistake. She will inform her supervisor. She will take measures to prevent future errors. She can plan to do something nice for herself after work, like taking a walk, to show herself some compassion and care.

## Connect-Point

The ACT approach necessitates a change of habit, mindset and beliefs. Instead of allowing our self-critic to beat us up or we succumbing to avoiding, denying or numbing the pain, ACT requires us to become aware of, acknowledge, admit and accept that we are in pain and embrace them. It also entails forming new habits of speaking to self and loving self unconditionally.

Practising ACT consistently and patiently will significantly improve our emotional well-being. However it is common for those who are new to the practice to encounter pitfalls.

At the 'A' phase, people can become overly absorbed in their feelings, leading to excessive rumination and self-pity. If we feel more weighed down than relieved after we have connected with our emotions, we should check if we are indulging in self-pity.

Another common pitfall is using self-compassion to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions or addressing problematic behaviour. This could happen to John if he becomes content with practising ACT without seeking to understand why he was excluded. He might miss an opportunity to address any issues his colleagues find objectionable.

Another challenge is underestimating the effort required for this practice. Developing the skill of self-compassion takes time and dedication. Patience is essential as we often start superficially, not addressing deeply enough underlying emotional pain or self-critical thoughts. For John, these might be "You are not good enough" or "You don't belong." For Jane, they might be "You messed up again!" or "You are useless."

As we continue with the practice, our courage and commitment to engage more deeply with ourselves should grow. We will also grow in becoming more motivated to take constructive actions to address the difficult situations we found ourselves in. So do not lose heart. Sustaining this practice will certainly transform our relationship with ourselves, hence enhancing our emotional well-being.



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