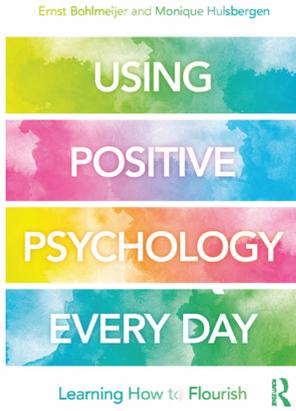


Have A Break

This chapter introduces compassion as a resource to cope with suffering



Contents



1. Take A Break

By Ernst Bohlmeijer and Monique Hulsbergen

From *Using Positive Psychology Every Day*



Have a break

Introduction

We are often unkind to ourselves; we are more used to judging ourselves critically – our achievements, our looks, our social skills, etc. Our core message to ourselves is that we are not good enough unless we absolutely excel in these areas. There are very few people who will wholeheartedly tell themselves: ‘I am satisfied with myself just as I am.’ We are also dismissive of ourselves when we become ill, are in pain, or changing physically as a result of becoming older.

In recent years, a lot of research has been conducted that indicates that this critical attitude contributes to feelings of stress, insecurity, aggression, and sadness. It is abundantly clear that a self-critical attitude does not contribute to happiness and well-being. The number one way of becoming unhappy is to focus on the things you are unhappy or unsatisfied with. Positive psychology regards compassion and self-appreciation as important factors contributing to well-being.

This chapter introduces the concepts of compassion and appreciation, and teaches you to develop these qualities. The word ‘compassion’ is occasionally met with resistance. It sounds soft; it makes people feel weak. This is because of their conviction that you need to be tough in order to remain standing in our society, or that you need to be critical of yourself in order to achieve something. Research shows that

this is not the case. Compassion is all about the courage to take wise action to relieve suffering and promote well-being and suffering (Gilbert and Choden, 2013). A compassionate and appreciative attitude towards yourself and others will let you achieve more, and will let you experience greater relaxation and balance. This chapter focuses specifically on self-compassion and self-appreciation. Chapter 8, on connecting, covers compassion for others.

Self-compassion and self-appreciation

The developed brain: benefits and burdens

In order to explain self-compassion, we will first explain a little about the way our brains work. Our brain can be viewed as a layered construction: the brainstem, the limbic system, and the neocortex (Gilbert, 2009). These layers are all connected and function coherently. The brainstem regulates the autonomous nervous system based on reflexes. The limbic system regulates emotions. The neocortex is the upper layer and enables us to think and reflect. Higher species of animal (humans, apes) are different from lower species for several reasons, including their capacity for reflection and thought. Lower species lack this capacity, living and surviving on the basis of their reflexes (autonomous nervous system, brainstem) and emotions (limbic system) instead. The brainstem and limbic system are active in human brains as well. For example, during threatening situations, both amygdalae (the two almond-shaped cores just above the ears) are triggered. Unfortunately, however, these amygdalae do not 'recognize' the difference between real and imaginary threats.

We owe much to our neocortex. Our capacity for thought, our ability to imagine something, to schedule, to consult, to use language, to organize, and to reflect has served us well. It allowed us to develop technology which reduced our dependence on Mother Nature's whims, ensuring we survived

as a species. But our capabilities come with a downside, which is that we are able, for example, to imagine all sorts of future threats. Thoughts about possible threats trigger the amygdalae and bring us into a state of readiness, even when there is no real current danger. Self-criticism is one of the abilities a developed brain has, since it allows us to imagine an 'ideal self' which we then compare to our 'current self'. Many people experience a difference between their ideal and current selves. This feeling of inadequacy is experienced as a threat which triggers the amygdalae, the fight or flight response we are subject to at any moment of impending threat. We set to work to better ourselves, driven by fear – even though fear is no basis for learning new skills. In fact, it undermines our efforts.

The neocortex (more specifically the left prefrontal section) also houses our ability to experience compassion and love. Giving or receiving compassion and love are abilities we have all been provided with, since they are traits we are born with – hardwired into the structure of our brains. Research shows that applying these abilities take us to a state of peace, reducing emotions like fear or aggression. Where self-criticism is a form of attacking the self, compassion is a form of nursing it. Brain research shows that activity in the left prefrontal cortex coincides with reduced activity in the limbic system. In other words: compassion and love reduce fear and aggression.

Interestingly, compassion and love in this respect work differently than, for example, relaxation or happiness. We know that fear cannot coexist with relaxation or happiness. People are never simultaneously fearful and relaxed, or fearful and happy. This is different for experiencing compassion, because compassion can coexist with unpleasant emotions like fear, anger, or sadness. Compassion and love are states of feeling that are all-encompassing. The next chapter, on post-traumatic growth, will cover this feature of compassion again, because compassion reinforces the ability to self-heal when processing unpleasant experiences.

The importance of soothing

Psychologist Paul Gilbert (2009) describes human beings as the result of evolutionary developments. Gilbert's vision of our species is apologetic: We did not choose to be born into this body, with this layered brain structure, As such, we cannot be blamed for the problems arising as a result of its complexity. The right insights, attention, and training can enable us to improve the interplay between the parts of our brain, in order to improve our sense of well-being. Whereas the demands and standards we currently impose on ourselves are high, whereas we are critical of ourselves, and whereas we are afraid of possible threats, it is possible to train ourselves to experience greater compassion and love. This requires practise, because it is a biological given that our attention is more easily held by potential threats than positive experiences. This is not a conscious effort, because our species' past survival required us to be on high alert. But the brain is capable of making new connections if its focus is shifted toward enjoyment, compassion, and connectedness.

Gilbert says the first step to compassion for oneself is to be understanding of the circumstances we did not choose to be in. Each of us was put on this earth with complex brain structures, in a fragile body, with our own sexuality, into a particular culture, into a particular time, into a particular family with parents or guardians with their own possibilities or limitations, with genetically determined talents or imperfections. Understanding this allows us to feel responsible for those circumstances we do have a hand in deciding.

Gilbert (in Gilbert and Choden, 2013) defines compassion as the ability to be sensitive and engage with suffering and the courage to take action to alleviate or prevent suffering. The ability to engage with suffering is the first psychology of compassion. It comprises attributes such as care-focused motivation, being sensitive with open attention, empathy and compassionate non-judgement. The skills to actually alleviate suffering are the second psychology of compassion. Examples of these skills are the ability to apply compassionate thinking, to use compassionate imagery and compassionate behaviour.

In order to train ourselves to be more compassionate towards ourselves, it helps to understand how we respond to life's challenges from our neurobiology. Gilbert (2009) describes how, globally speaking, we have three emotion-regulation systems. These are things we have in common with all mammals, being: a threat system, a drive system, and a soothing or affiliation system (see below). In animals, these systems are generally in balance: If there are no threats, if there is no hunger, and if reproduction is assured, then the animal can relax and recover. For the survival of the species, it is important that each system can be activated as soon as it is needed. In humans, however, the three emotion-regulation systems are often out of whack.

The imbalance in humans is born from an under-developed calming system, among other things. Compared to animals, we are not very good at recovering and calming down even if we are safe and our basic needs have been met. In addition, in many people either or both of the other systems are overdeveloped. Some people have a highly developed threat system, always on guard and focused on potential threats, even steeling themselves using aggression. Others are mainly oriented towards finding more resources by chasing and striving for material wealth, status, or power.

THREE EMOTION-REGULATION SYSTEMS (BASED ON GILBERT, 2009)

1. I am always on guard

In order to be able to quickly identify a threat, the threat system is important. Once a threat is identified, the emotions fear, aggression, or disgust are triggered, enabling a human or an animal to act accordingly, for example, by fighting, fleeing, or freezing. Without this system, no species would survive. Once the threat is passed, the system relaxes. Even though the emotions it triggers are unpleasant, they are designed to protect us. This system is always on high-alert, and has been designed to overestimate potential danger – just to be safe. The brain always prioritizes the activation of this system if a threat is perceived, even though it may coincide with something pleasant.

In humans, this system is activated in times of real, imaginary, or supposed danger, but also when we are faced with the fear of being hurt, out of control, or excluded. The brain does not recognize the difference between these diverse kinds of fear, and just goes through the motions of its standard danger response. In some people, this system may be overdeveloped – possibly as a result of traumatic experiences or increased threats during their life (for example, because of little basic family security due to conflicts, being bullied at school, etc.). This system will have had extensive training, and will need only a relatively minor trigger, such as a fearful thought, to activate.

2. I am never satisfied and always want more

The drive system is important to survive and grow. Wants and desires are its motivations, and fulfilling these feelings is pleasant. Without the desire for food, animals would not hunt – and thus they would starve. Without the desire to create offspring, animals would not mate – and thus they would die out. In animals, this system relaxes when the needs are met and there are sufficient resources to ensure survival.

In humans, the drive system can also be activated even if the basic needs have long since been met. This is a good thing, because if we did not have this motivator to propel us forward, we would likely not have gotten past the Stone Age! The system is exhaustively trained in our consumer society, and is handily exploited by commerce. Desires or needs can make us look for more money, more sex, more recognition, more social contacts, more food, more power, more everything. These desires can be satiated only briefly, and can cause a form of agitated drive which can become unpleasant; nothing is ever enough. The basis for this system's continued activation can be found in our childhood, for example, if our parents or guardians loved us only conditionally, such as only if we did well at school. Even though our brain is designed to look for resources and satisfy our wants, the trick in our current society is instead to make conscious choice from the superfluity of available options.

3. I relax and recover

The soothing or affiliation system is important for relaxation and recovery. The feelings are pleasant, but of a different quality to those of the previous system. These feelings include satisfaction, inner peace, and well-being. The hormones endorphin and oxytocin are released, reducing the concentration of the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. Without this system, we risk exhaustion. Once this system takes to the foreground, we are able to connect, to be creative, to play. Apart from short-term recovery, this system creates resources or 'reserves' which can be addressed in the long term.

In many of us, this system is insufficiently developed or active. If people have felt little love or appreciation during their lives, then this system will be

less developed. In addition, there is little room for this system in our competitive consumer society. Being busy, experiencing stress are things that our society places too much value in. The 'good news' is that this system is not fixed in our brains, and can be activated by giving ourselves the care and love we need, and to enjoy what exists in the moment. Our ability to generate images and thoughts influences the brain, making it easy to activate the defensive systems. The same ability can be used to address the calming system instead. This way, we use the abilities bestowed on us by our neocortex to improve our own well-being. Compassion training aims to activate the calming system, allowing us to restore the balance between the three systems.

The three emotion regulation systems influence the way the autonomous nervous system functions. The nervous system regulates a large number of our bodily functions without us being consciously aware of this; functions like respiration, digestion, blood pressure, heartbeat. Within the autonomous nervous system, activity is alternately shared between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic nervous system ensures that the body obtains the energy it needs to take action: The (stress) hormones adrenaline and cortisol are released into our bloodstream, our heart rate quickens, our blood pressure increases, and the digestion decreases. The parasympathetic nervous system influences the organs in a way that allows the body to recover, and activates the digestive system.

The threat system and the drive system lead to the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, while the calming system leads to the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system. The activation of the parasympathetic nervous system involves the hormone oxytocin; this ensures feelings of relaxation, calmness, healing, pain reduction, and connectedness. This hormone, also known as the 'bliss hormone', enables a new-born to bond with its mother through, among other things, touch. Oxytocin is mainly produced as a result of nerves on the skin obtaining information about the outside world, but we are also able to trigger the production of this hormone ourselves (through touch, among other things), through caring and being compassionate to ourselves.

An underdeveloped calming system causes the sympathetic nervous system to go into overdrive, with damaging results to our health (in the long term). For our physical health, the development of a system that calms and relaxes us is of major value. Developing compassion is an important key factor in this process, because it enhances the calming system and reduces the intensity with which we experience emotions. If, in addition to that, we are able appreciate ourselves, we experience increased feelings of satisfaction, allowing us to recuperate and relax.

Self-compassion

In addition to the aforementioned physiological effects, research shows that compassion contributes to well-being and happiness. Psychologist Kristin Neff (2011) is another researcher that investigates the effects of self-compassion and self-appreciation on well-being. According to Neff, self-compassion includes the following three characteristics:

- The ability to be caring and kind to yourself, even in the face of your weaknesses, failures, illness, pain, or unpleasant emotions;
- An understanding of the fact that pain and discomfort are shared human experiences. We all have to deal with adversity, and we all make mistakes. We are all in the same boat; and
- The ability to stay attentive and kind when faced with unpleasant emotions and experiences.

Self-compassion, in other words, is about being kind to yourself unconditionally, and to be attentive to life's discomforts: Do not run away from them, but realize that they are part of the human condition. Among other things, this means being compassionate towards your weaknesses. Self-compassion does not mean repressing unpleasant experiences; it means supporting yourself through adversity in a caring way.

The results of the scientific investigations by researchers such as Gilbert and Neff can be summarized as follows. People with greater self-compassion:

- Are less prone to feelings of fear, sadness, irritation, uncertainty, and stress, and the unpleasant feelings are felt less intensely and more briefly when they do occur;
- Are less prone to repressing unpleasant experiences (thoughts and emotions), and are prepared to weather these experiences, because they are able to support themselves through these experiences;
- Worry less, because they do not try to repress unpleasant experiences;
- Experience greater happiness and optimism;
- Are more appreciative of themselves and the good things in life;
- Are better able to sense what is and is not right for them, and therefore more frequently choose the things that give them joy;
- Show themselves during social engagements because they are not afraid of rejection;
- Are less afraid of failure, and deal with failure more easily;
- Experience greater connection because they are less fixated on their weaknesses, and are able to visualize their place in a greater context (life, humanity);
- Have greater emotional intelligence, meaning they are better able to retain their emotional balance if they are threatened to be thrown off. When confronted with problems, they are able to remain calm and find it easy to adapt, knowing that their problems are not different to those experienced by others. This even shows in the fact that their cortisol levels (stress hormones) are lower when faced with adversity;
- Are better able to learn new skills, because they are prepared to make mistakes. In contrast to self-critical people, it is not fear but love that is the force driving them to learn, and they have no need to prove themselves. These people generally experience more enjoyment during the learning process, and are generally less focused on results; and

- Are better able to be compassionate toward others, and find it easier to forgive other people, meaning that they do not hold grudges.

Self-appreciation

Self-appreciation can be seen as an extension of self-compassion. This appreciation means viewing yourself as a valuable human being, just as you are. You realize that, just like everybody else, you have your weaknesses and you make mistakes; you are satisfied with parts of you that are mediocre; you are happy with and enjoy your strengths. This self-appreciation might be mistaken for overinflated self-esteem, but there is a fundamental difference. In psychology (and in education), attention is paid to problems connected to low self-esteem, and attempts are made to improve this self-esteem. Low self-esteem can lead to complaints, such as fear and depression. Improving self-esteem comes with a few caveats. First, interventions aimed at improving self-esteem are often aimed at combatting weaknesses; a process which, in the end, does not provide enjoyment or energy. We covered this in greater detail in Chapter 2. Second, self-esteem is determined by looking at other people, meaning that there is a risk of lowering your impression of others and/or overinflating your impression of yourself in order to improve your own self-esteem. This is a precarious starting point for change, because the self-image becomes dependent on its comparison to others, with your self-esteem plummeting as soon as you come across people who are better at something than you are.

Self-appreciation, on the other hand, is deriving pride and joy from your strengths just as you are accepting of your weaknesses, knowing that none of us is perfect. This self-appreciation does not come at the cost of your views of others, because you can appreciate them for who they are and do not need to undermine them to feel better about yourself. This has a positive influence on interpersonal relations, and, for example, in working life, will bring out the best in a team.

As early as the first century AD, the philosopher Epictetus described why no human being should let their self-image (and appreciation of others) depend on a comparison to others, because this is a fruitless endeavour. Your traits were gifted to you through heredity, aptitude, social environment, and upbringing. These are not personal achievements, but happenstance and luck. Epictetus wrote:

These reasonings are unconnected: “I am richer than you, therefore I am better”; “I am more eloquent than you, therefore I am better.” The connection is rather this: “I am richer than you, therefore my property is greater than yours;” “I am more eloquent than you, therefore my style is better than yours.” But you, after all, are neither property nor style. (Epictetus 2011, p. 58)

Developing compassion for oneself – exercises

The following exercises invite you to be kinder to yourself, and to be so more often. These are exercises which can be done in times of hardship, but it makes sense to familiarize yourself with them beforehand, turning them into a habit.

Exercise 1: Stop self-criticizing and appreciate yourself for who you are

This exercise is aimed at reinforcing the intention to be friendlier towards yourself. This improves the frequency with which the recovery system in your brain is activated.

It may seem pat, but this is essentially the key: Stop criticizing yourself. Stop bringing yourself down. It is a habit that will never make you happy. Pay attention to what you tell yourself. Are these the kinds of things you would dare say to a friend? Self-criticism can be utterly cruel.

Of course, you cannot change a cultivated and culturally determined habit at the flick of a switch. So, stop judging

yourself if you are ever critical of yourself. Your intention to stop self-criticizing will make an actual difference. The intention is to appreciate yourself for who you are. This does not mean becoming lazy, or not addressing yourself to take action. It is about reducing to zero the type of self-criticism that is an attack on yourself. Why would you put yourself under siege?

Initially, you will become quicker to notice episodes of self-criticism. These are probably moments during which you are confronted with your weaknesses, pain, or adversity, generating unpleasant emotions (fear, sadness, anger). Ask yourself: Is it my intention to come at myself this hard? Can I allow myself to be kinder to myself? Do I fully realize that, just like any other person, I make mistakes and I have weaknesses?

There is a clip on YouTube that features American actor and stand-up comedian Bob Newhart. In it he plays a psychiatrist who applies the 'Stop it!' method. You can find it by searching for the keywords *Bob Newhart stop it* on YouTube. It is, of course, impossible to repress your thoughts. Even self-criticizing thoughts cannot be controlled in this fashion. Once you realize what an odd thing it is to tell yourself off, you can playfully remind yourself of this advice. If ever you notice a self-criticizing thought rearing its head, just tell yourself: 'Stop it!'

Exercise 2: Wish yourself the best

This exercise involves consciously wishing yourself good things. This reinforces the calming system, and restores balance to the three emotion regulation systems. This exercise may feel a bit awkward or soft, but it is a useful tool for reinforcing your self-compassion.

Once you realize how subversive a self-critical attitude really is, you may experience feelings of sadness, or remember past events, for example, if you did not experience much love during your childhood, or if you were often criticized. If this should happen, you should first allow these emotions

to air. Page 99 describes an exercise that allows you to give room to unpleasant emotions.

Have a seat, get comfortable, and relax. Experience the way you are sitting down, and realize that you are a human being with vulnerabilities and strengths. Realize that life is full of positive experiences, but that you will have to endure some set-backs. Let this fact sink in. This is part of being human.

Ask yourself what it is that you need right now. What do you want it for? Do you need relaxation, rest, kindness, security, happiness, health? Allow whatever word best describes your current needs to surface.

Now wish yourself the fulfilment of this need. Wishing it does not mean forcing it. Your wish may or may not be granted, but there is nothing wrong with wishing good upon yourself.

For the next few minutes, say your wish in your head. For example: 'I wish rest for myself, I wish rest for myself, I wish rest for myself.' Some people find it helps to do this in time with their breathing, but this is not required.

Since it is a known fact that a loving touch of the skin will help release the hormone oxytocin, lightly touching yourself can help. For example, placing a hand on the area around your heart, placing both hands on your upper arms, or caressing them. This touch can help you calm down.

End the exercise after a few minutes.

Fredrickson et al. (2008) conducted research into a compassion training course for employees at a large IT company. Participants were invited to take part in various exercises, such as focusing their attention on the area around their heart, and then thinking of someone they cared about. They were then asked to expand their attention to themselves and others (see Exercises 7 and 8 in Chapter 7). The training uses thoughts and visualizations whose goal is to stimulate pleasant emotions, such as love, satisfaction, and compassion. A group of 102 employees took part in six sessions of sixty minutes each; a group of 100 others was placed on a waiting list. Results indicated that participants experienced a gradual increase of pleasant emotions in training; for people on the waiting list, levels of pleasant emotions remained the same. It was also demonstrated that the increase in pleasant emotions experienced

daily had a positive effect on life goals and social support, while reducing the number of health complaints. This had additional effects on life satisfaction experiences. Follow-up research conducted fifteen months later showed that the effects experienced by participants in the training were retained (Cohn et al., 2009).

Exercise 3: The 'granny-exercise'

This exercise uses your imagination. Thoughts and imaginations influence our brain's response. The threat system is activated by our imagination in no-time, for example, if we imagine we are in danger. This same ability is addressed in this exercise, but here as a way of activating our calming system.

Imagine someone you know or knew who always has or had your best interest at heart. You may have (had) a loving grandmother, who was always there for you in times of trouble. It could be anyone, such as a father, mother, neighbour, or teacher. Alternatively, you can imagine a person who radiates compassion, if you prefer. This can be someone you know personally, or someone you know from TV.

Imagine that person is here now, being kind to you. Use your fantasy and imagination. What is this person doing? Have they put their arm around you? How do they look at you? What are they saying? Feel the energy of this flow through you. What do you feel?

There is nothing magical about this exercise; you are not generating energies or contacting the dearly departed. It works the same as when you imagine something that frightens you, which is to say by activating a system in your brain. For these compassionate images, it is your calming system that is activated.

Exercise 4: Fan the flame of kindness within

Take a notepad. For the next five minutes, write down situations during which you were kind to yourself and/or

someone else this week. It does not matter how big or small, how ordinary or exceptional. For example: asking a colleague about their day, complimenting a child, helping an elderly person cross the street, letting someone have your seat on a bus, addressing yourself positively, donating to charity, driving a colleague home who was feeling poorly, comforting the parents of a child with learning disabilities, tussling with your dog, or giving your partner a bunch of flowers.

Reflect on how these situations affected yourself and the other person(s). How did they respond, and how did you feel? Reflect on the kindness within yourself. What do these situations tell you about yourself as a person?

Exercise 5: Welcome everything, suppressing nothing

This exercise is aimed at recognizing unpleasant emotions. We tend to suppress or avoid unpleasant emotions, because these are experiences we do not tend to enjoy. Nevertheless, these experiences are part of our life, and we damage ourselves by not letting them in. First, because rejecting unpleasant experiences makes us feel even worse. Second, because this will also lead us to close off from pleasant experiences as well, since it is impossible to reject unpleasantness exclusively. We have come up with so many ways of evading the things we do not enjoy, such as addictive behaviour (excessive eating, drinking, sex, drug use) and avoidance behaviour (avoiding situations which, for example, inspire fear).

Earlier we described how self-compassion and love are all-encompassing experiences, which can coexist alongside feelings of fear, anger or sadness. The goal of compassion is not to suppress other feelings, but to recognize that something is hard *and* to face it with kindness.

This is an exercise you can do if you are confronted by fear, anger, or sadness.

1. Allow the feeling to exist. How does it make you feel, physically? If you find yourself thinking about how this

feeling came to be, then try to leave the 'story' of the emotions for what it is. Experience how the pain or emotion is expressing itself in your body as a form of energy. Your throat, your chest, your stomach: these are often the areas where emotions are felt the most. What do they feel like: oppressive, restrictive, large, small, sharp, hard, burning, freezing, prickling? You may feel as though the emotions are expressing themselves in certain shapes, or certain colours. Allow these images to surface.

2. Tell yourself: 'This sadness, this fear, or this anger is difficult for me and it is permitted', and touch yourself lightly (hand near your heart, or hands on your upper arms). If you find it comforting to do so, remember the Granny-exercise; imagine someone who has your best interest at heart – a loving granny, a friend, a parent, a partner. What would this person say to you right now?
3. Keep track of what is happening to your body. Allow the feelings to become stronger, to increase, to reduce. Whatever they do, allow it.
4. As soon as you notice that you start to wander and begin looking for explanations for your anger, sadness, or fear, then try to let go of this 'story' and refocus on the energy in your body.
5. Repeat to yourself: 'This is permitted', and touch yourself lightly.
6. Take as long as you want to allow the feelings to exist.

References

- Cohn, M.A., Fredrickson, B.L., Brown, S.L., Mikels, J.A., and Conway, A.M. (2009). Happiness unpacked: Positive emotions increase life satisfaction by building resilience. *Emotion*, 9, 361–368.
- Epictetus (2011). *Zakboekje: wenken voor een evenwichtig leven*. Amsterdam: Boom uitgevers Amsterdam.
- Fredrickson, B.L., Cohn, M.A., Coffey, K.A., Pek, J., and Finkel, S.M. (2008). Open hearts build lives: Positive emotions, induced through loving-kindness meditation,

build consequential personal resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95, 1045–1062.

Gilbert, P.G. (2009). *The compassionate mind*. London: Constable.

Gilbert, P.G., and Choden (2013). *Mindful compassion: Using the power of mindfulness and compassion to transform our lives*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.

Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion: Stop beating yourself up and leave insecurity behind*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.