



How to develop self-compassion - *in just about anyone*

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR ACT THERAPISTS

By Dr. Russ Harris

WHAT IS SELF COMPASSION?

As the great R.E.M. song goes, ‘Everybody hurts sometimes’. Life dishes up pain for all of us. We all get to repeatedly experience disappointment, frustration, failure, rejection, illness, injury, conflict, hostility, grief, fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, loss, loneliness, health issues, financial issues, relationship issues, work issues, and so on. Unfortunately, when we experience great pain, we often don’t treat ourselves very well.

Self-compassion involves acknowledging your own suffering and responding kindly. In other words, treating yourself with the same warmth, caring and kindness that you’d extend to someone

you love if they were in similar pain. For thousands of years, self-compassion has played a central role in many religious and spiritual practices, and now it is becoming increasingly important in many models of therapy, coaching and counselling. Certainly it is implicit in every aspect of the ACT (acceptance & commitment therapy) model.

A wealth of research shows the benefits of self-compassion with a wide range of clinical issues, from depression and anxiety disorders to grief, trauma and addiction. So if you’re a therapist, coach or counsellor, it’s well worth knowing how to help your clients to develop it. And, of course, to develop it in yourself!

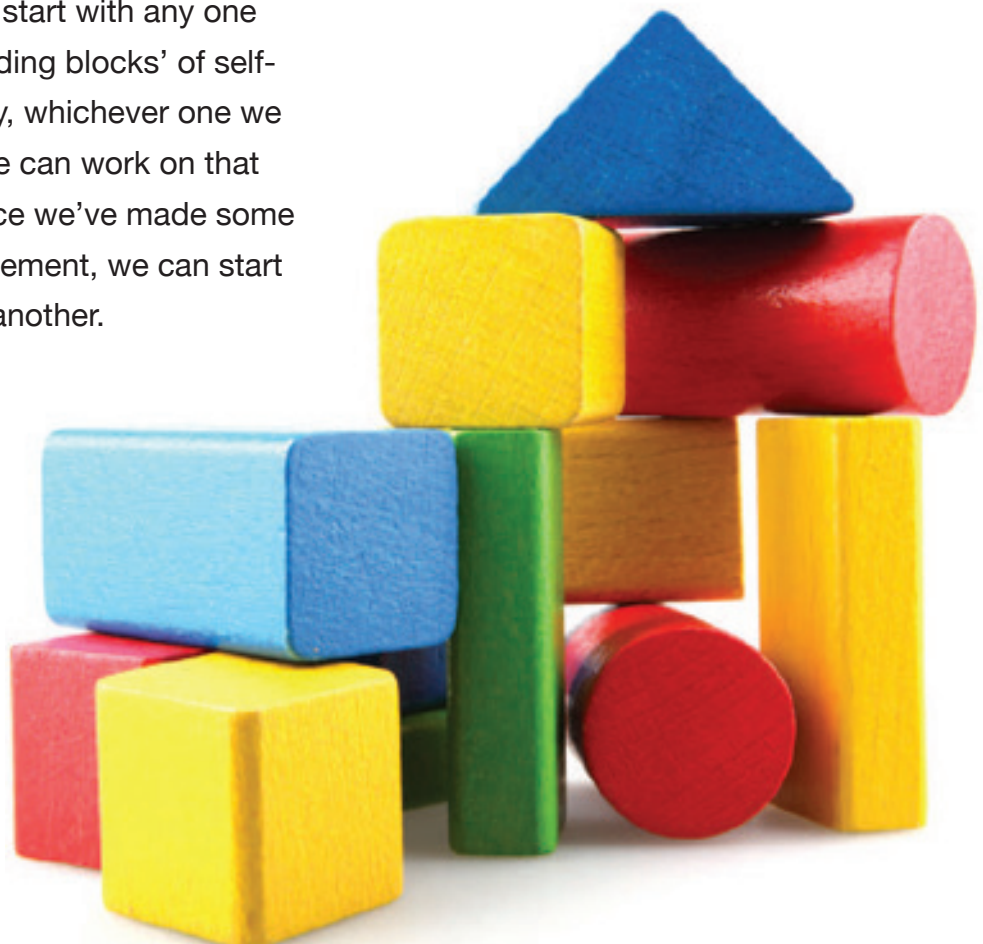
*“ Compassion is a two-way street”
– Frank Capra*



THE SIX 'BUILDING BLOCKS' OF SELF-COMPASSION

Many people have little or no experience of self-compassion, and some may find it threatening or overwhelming or just “Too hard!”. This is especially likely if they leap head first into an intensive exercise such as a traditional self-compassion meditation.

Luckily, though, we can build self-compassion through ‘baby steps’, so it’s not threatening or overwhelming or “Too hard!”. We can start with any one of the six basic ‘building blocks’ of self-compassion – ideally, whichever one we find easiest – and we can work on that for a while. Then once we’ve made some progress with that element, we can start experimenting with another.

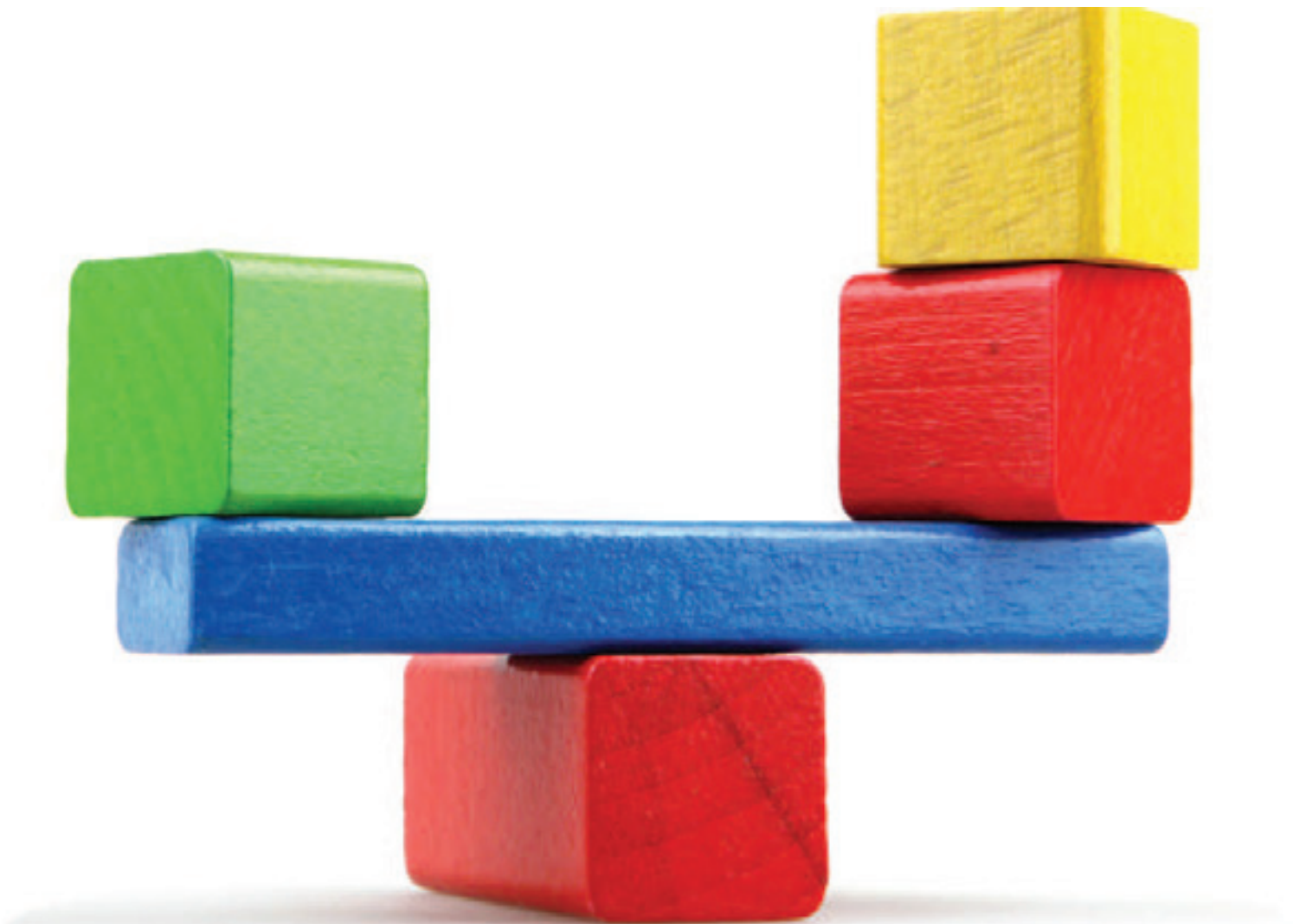


In this way, going gently, step-by-step, we can build our self-compassion skills over time. As we develop more 'building blocks', we can learn how to stack them on top of each other, to build taller and more stable towers.

There is no need for people to meditate, or to follow some religious practice. (Although they can if they want to!) The ACT model gives us a vast range of incredibly flexible ways to develop self-compassion in just about anybody, one step at a time.

The six element model of self-compassion that follows is based on ACT, but if you do a bit of reading on the topic, you'll find most approaches to self-compassion include most or all of these elements.

However, before we go any further, let's be clear: there is not one universally-agreed definition of self-compassion, or 'best-practice' approach to developing it.



ELEMENT #1

ACKNOWLEDGING PAIN

One of the core ACT processes is ‘contacting the present moment’ – i.e. flexibly noticing, with an attitude of curiosity and openness, what is present: right here, right now. (This is of course a central element in all forms of mindfulness practice.)

This process plays an essential first step in self-compassion: we consciously and intentionally notice and acknowledge our own pain. We notice, with openness and curiosity, the painful thoughts, feelings, emotions, images, sensations, urges, memories etc. that are present within us in this moment.

This is very different from our ‘default mode’ of turning away from our pain as fast as possible – trying to suppress it, avoid it, deny it, escape it, or distract from it.

Often it’s useful to express what we have noticed (in non-judgmental language). For example, we may say, “I’m noticing painful feelings of rejection” or “I’m noticing thoughts about being a loser” or “I’m noticing sadness and anxiety”.

“ Our human compassion binds us the one to the other - not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.”

- Nelson Mandela



ELEMENT 2#

DEFUSION FROM SELF-JUDGMENT

Another core ACT process is ‘defusion’ – i.e. learning to separate/unhook/ detach from our thoughts and beliefs and see them for what they are: nothing more or less than strings of words and pictures. (This is also a central element in many forms of mindfulness practice.)

Most of us know all too well just how quick our minds are to judge and criticize us. Our minds seem to relish any opportunity to pull out a big stick and give us a hiding; to point our flaws and failures; to label us as ‘not good enough’ in a hundred different ways.

An essential aspect of self-compassion is learning how to defuse from all that harsh self-talk. We can’t magically train our minds to stop speaking to

us that way. (If you’ve ever tried, you know what I’m talking about.) Sure, you can learn to think more positively, and practise non-judgmental awareness - but that won’t stop your mind from judging and criticizing you.

But we can learn to defuse from those harsh self-judgments and ‘not good enough’ stories. We can notice, name and unhook from those cognitions. We can learn how to see them as nothing more or less than words and pictures, without getting into debates about whether they are true or false. And we can let them come and stay and go in their own good time, without getting caught up in them or pushed around by them.

“ Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that have built against it.”
- Rumi





ELEMENT #3

ACTING WITH KINDNESS

Another two of the core ACT processes are 'values' and 'committed action'. 'Values' are our hearts deepest desires for how we want to behave on an ongoing basis; how we want to treat ourselves, others and the world around us. 'Committed action' means skillful flexible action, guided by our core values.

The value that forms the foundation of self-compassion is 'kindness'. All types of self-compassion practice – wherever they may have originated from – revolve around this powerful core value.

“ There is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophies. My brain and my heart are my temples; my philosophy is kindness.”

– Dalai Lama



Indeed, we can think of kindness as the glue that holds together all the other elements of self-compassion. For example, when we consciously acknowledge our pain, this is an act of kindness. And when we defuse from harsh self-criticism, this too is an act of kindness.

So once we acknowledge our pain, the aim is to treat ourselves with kindness. And fortunately there are many, many ways in which we can act kindly towards ourselves.

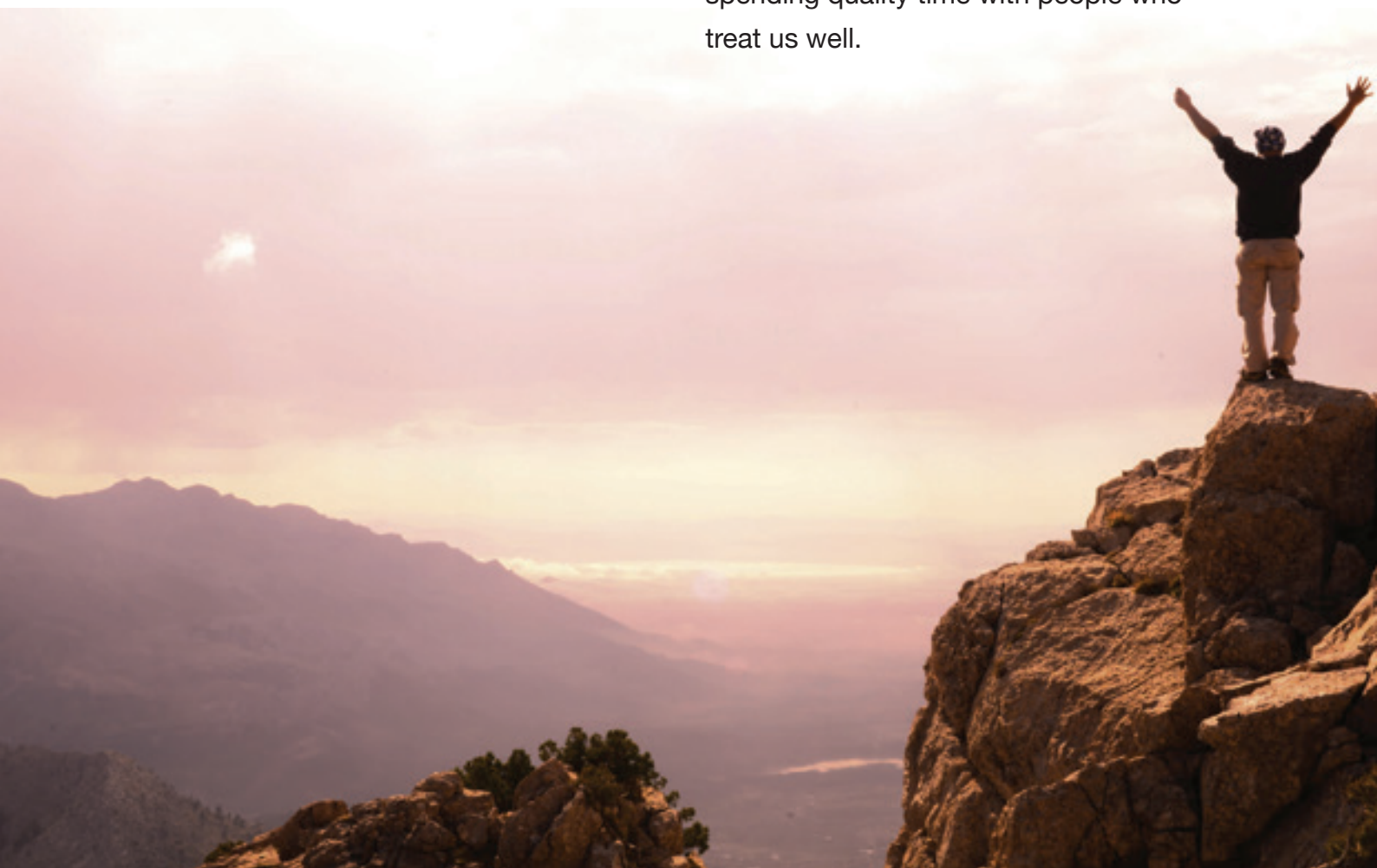
We can use kind self-talk, such as reminding ourselves that we are human, that we are fallible, that everyone makes mistakes, that no one is perfect.

We can talk to ourselves in a caring and gentle and understanding way, much as we would speak to a loved one in similar pain.

We can use kind imagery, such as 'loving kindness meditation' or 'inner child re-scripting' or numerous other practices where we create powerful images to tap into self-kindness.

We can use kind self-touch, such as placing a hand gently on our heart or on top of a painful feeling, and sending warmth and caring inwards through the palm.

And we can do kind deeds, such as self-soothing rituals, or self-care activities, or spending quality time with people who treat us well.



ELEMENT #4

ACCEPTANCE

“ Compassion is the antitoxin of the soul: where there is compassion even the most poisonous impulses remain relatively harmless.”

- Eric Hoffer

Another core ACT process is ‘acceptance’. This does not mean passively accepting a difficult situation. On the contrary, the ‘committed action’ process in ACT involves taking effective action, guided by your values, to do everything possible to improve the situation as much as possible. ‘Acceptance’ in ACT refers to accepting our thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, urges, sensations. Acceptance means we ‘open up’ and ‘make room’ for our thoughts and feelings; we allow them to flow through us, without fighting them, running from them, or being controlled by them. All too often, when pain shows up in our lives, we try to escape it through activities that tend to make our lives worse in the long term. For example, we may turn to alcohol, junk food, drugs, cigarettes, mindless consumerism, zoning out in front of the TV, dropping out of important activities, social isolation, self-harm, or even suicidality. These are not kind ways to treat

ourselves. When we practice accepting our painful thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations (instead of doing self-defeating or life-draining things to avoid them) this is an act of kindness in itself.



ELEMENT #5

VALIDATION

All too often, when we are in great pain, we invalidate our own emotional experience. We don't acknowledge our pain as a valid experience – as a normal and natural part of being human.

Our minds tell us that we shouldn't feel like this, we shouldn't react like this, we should be able to handle it better, we shouldn't have these thoughts and feelings. Often, our minds belittle us – tell us that we are over-reacting, or we're weak, or we have nothing to complain about because “there are starving kids in Africa”, and these are merely “first world worries”. Our minds may even tell us to toughen up, suck it up, stop being a cry-baby, or “be a real man”.

Obviously, this type of harsh, critical, invalidating attitude is the very opposite of kindness.

One aspect of validating our experience is defusion. Even though we can't stop them from arising, we can learn to defuse (unhook, detach) from these harsh self-judgments, unrealistic expectations, and unkind comparisons to others.



The other aspect is to actively validate our experience through self- talk. We can remind ourselves – (in a warm, caring inner voice) that it is normal and natural for humans to have painful thoughts and feelings when life is difficult, when we make mistakes, when we get rejected, or when we experience any kind of reality gap (a gap between the reality you

want and the reality you've got). And when our minds compare our emotional reactions unfavourably to those of others, we can remind ourselves that we are unique. After all, if anybody else on the planet had your unique DNA, your unique childhood, your unique life history, your unique physical body, they would respond exactly the same way that you respond (because they would, in fact, be you!).



ELEMENT #6

CONNECTEDNESS

Often when we are in great pain, our minds generate thoughts along the lines of “I am the only one going through this”, “I’m the only one who feels this way”, “No one else knows what this is like”, “No one cares”, “Everyone else is happy”, “Everyone else is better off than me”, “Why me?”, and so on.

Thoughts like these are commonplace, and completely natural. Most of us have experienced such thoughts at times, and there’s no known way to stop our minds from saying them.

However, the problem is not having such thoughts. The problem is fusing with them. If we fuse with these thoughts – get all caught up in them, buy into them – then this creates a sense of disconnection. We feel cut off, disconnected from others; we are on our own, the odd one out, no longer a part of the group. And our pain is all the more difficult, because we are suffering alone. If, on the other hand, we develop a sense of connectedness with others,

“A human being is part of the whole called by us ‘universe’ - a part limited in time and space. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

- Albert Einstein



this can help us with our pain. One way to help develop such connectedness, is to actively defuse (detach, unhook) from thoughts such as those above.

A second way is to spend time with people who care about you and treat you kindly, and actively engage with them; be fully present with them. Often it's useful to let these people know that you are in pain, and to accept their kindness (which will usually rapidly follow your disclosure).

And a third way is to actively think about how your pain is something you have in common with all human beings. Your

pain tells you that you have a heart; that you care deeply; that some things really matter to you. Your pain tells you that you are facing a 'reality gap' – a gap between the reality you want and the reality you've got.

Pain is what every living, caring human being feels, whenever they meet a reality gap. And the bigger that reality gap, the greater the pain that arises.

So your pain is not a sign of weakness or defectiveness or mental illness; it's a sign you are a living, caring human being. It's something you have in common with every living, caring human on the planet.





BUILDING SELF-COMPASSION BLOCK BY BLOCK

So as you can see, self-compassion is a construct of various elements. As I said at the beginning, there isn't one agreed definition of what it is, or 'formula' for developing it. If you read other texts on this topic, you may find other authors add in extra elements, or subdivide some elements, or even combine elements to simplify the construct.

Furthermore, this document is just a 'bare bones' outline. We can use a vast range of processes, practices, tools, techniques and exercises to develop any or all of the six elements above – from modern super-fast defusion techniques to ancient loving kindness meditations.

Many people have little or no experience of self-compassion, and some may find it threatening or overwhelming or just "Too hard!". This is especially likely if they leap head first into an intensive exercise such as a self-compassion meditation.



Luckily, though, we can work on self-compassion in ‘baby steps’, so it’s not threatening or overwhelming or “Too hard!”. We can start with any one of the six elements above – whichever we find easiest – and work on that for a while. Once we’ve made some progress with that element, then we can start experimenting with another. In this way,

going gently, step-by-step, we can build our self-compassion skills over time. And fortunately, the ACT model gives us a vast range of incredibly flexible ways to do this, with just about anybody. (So here’s hoping to meet you soon on one of my courses, where I can share this with you in depth.)



COMMON BARRIERS TO SELF-COMPASSION

Of course, helping our clients to develop self-compassion isn't always easy. It's especially difficult with people who have suffered from complex trauma, or who have no personal experience of kind and caring relationships with others.

Here are some of the most common barriers to self-compassion:

Fusion with unworthiness

The client fuses with self-narratives such as “I’m unworthy” or “I don’t deserve kindness”

Overwhelming emotions

The client becomes overwhelmed by emotions such as anxiety, sadness, guilt, or shame.

Pointlessness

The client fails to see the point of self-compassion: “How’s this going to help me?”

Lack of Personal Experience

The client has no personal experience of kind and caring relationships with others.

Prejudice

The client judges self-compassion harshly: as something ‘wishy-washy’ or ‘new age’; as something ‘religious’; as a sign of weakness; or in men, as something effeminate.

In my online training, you'll discover how to overcome such barriers, and actually convert them into opportunities to build more self-compassion.

I'll finish up now by asking you to reflect on this final quote, and consider how it is relevant to whatever model of therapy, coaching or counselling you currently use:

“ The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

All the best,
Cheers, Russ Harris
www.ImLearningACT.com



Russ Harris

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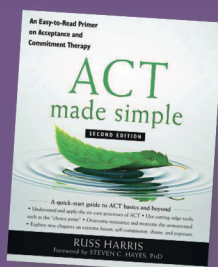
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www.contextualconsulting.co.uk

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And you'll discover a wealth of practical tools and strategies to effectively target depression (major depressive disorder and dysthymia) and the full range of anxiety disorders (from OCD & phobias to social anxiety & panic disorder). The workshop will include live demonstrations, videos of therapy sessions, and a wide range of experiential exercises.

Check out our other 2019 workshops!

Kirk Strosahl & Patricia Robinson – Mindfulness in ACT – September

Yvonne Barnes-Holmes – Enhancing ACT with RFT – October (available by webcast)

Louise Hayes – ACT for Young People – November

Joe Oliver – Intermediate Skills Workshop – November

Ray Owen – ACT for Physical Health – April