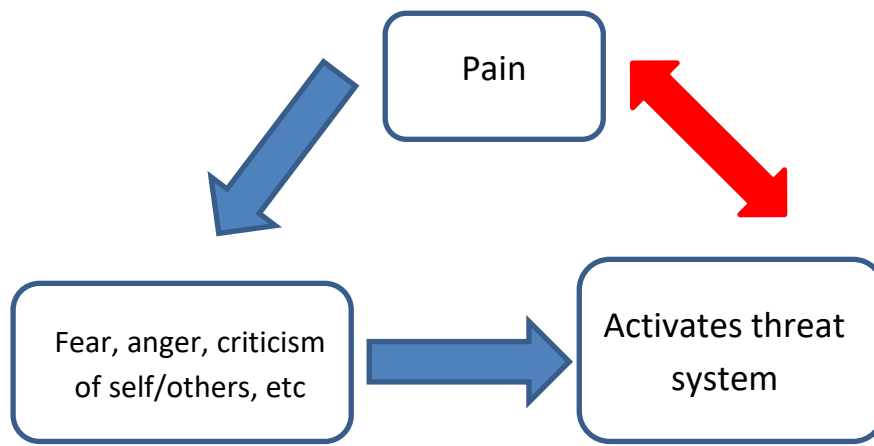


The importance of compassion in chronic pain

You have already heard us talking about how pain activates the threat system in our brains (it may help to refer back to the Information Session handout on mechanisms of pain). Pain can lead to emotions such as anxiety and anger, which activate these areas in the brain linked to perception of threat. This can become a vicious cycle whereby the brain is stuck in a state of high alert, which is one of the maintaining factors for increased sensitivity to pain.



The balance to the threat system is our self-soothing system, which is linked with the ability to access a sense of safeness, caring and kindness. Many people have had experiences in their life that have led to their self-soothing system being under-developed. Self-compassion and self-soothing may not come naturally.

However, we can learn to develop a kinder and less-judgemental way of talking with ourselves. By being more compassionate towards ourselves we also improve our ability to be able to self-soothe and “turn down” the threat dial.

The rest of this handout will cover different things that you can do to help. Developing a greater sense of compassion is a gradual process – start with one thing at a time before adding something else.

The building blocks of self-compassion:

1. Acknowledging pain – both physical and psychological. Use mindfulness skills to make contact with our experience in the present moment and be open to what is there, including unpleasant experiences and sensations. This is very different to what people often do when they are in pain, which is to try to avoid or suppress it.

2. Learning to step back from self-judgements. Our minds are often quick to judge and criticise ourselves (and others). An essential aspect of self-compassion is to learn to step back from this. We can't switch it off but we can get better at noticing when we're doing it, and learn strategies to "unhook" ourselves from such thoughts.
3. Acting with kindness. There are many ways in which we can act more kindly towards ourselves and others. There is a list of ways to practice this at the end.
4. Validation. Sometimes we don't acknowledge our emotional or physical pain as a valid experience. 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, etc. This type of harsh, invalidating attitude is the very opposite of kindness. Instead we can remind ourselves that we often do not get to choose what happens to us in our lives and it is normal and natural for humans to have painful thoughts and feelings when life is difficult.
5. Connectedness. Emotions such as fear, shame, guilt, and the harsh inner self-talk that comes with these can make us feel cut-off from others and that we are not good enough. The problem is not that we have such thoughts and emotions, it's that we believe them.



Resources:

- Mindfulness practice in general is helpful, although there are also specific mindfulness exercises aimed at developing greater compassion for self and others, e.g. the Breathworks website has a series of kindness meditations that you can buy and download (www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk). There is also a compassionate breath meditation on the Free Mindfulness Project website (<http://www.freemindfulness.org/download>)
- The Compassionate Mind Foundation website has a page of online resources which include things such as compassionate letter writing, building a compassionate image, and developing qualities of inner compassion (<https://compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/exercises>)
- Search YouTube for 'Mindfulness Exercises for Everyday Life (Solent NHS Trust)'. There are a variety of compassion based mindfulness exercises included in this list of tracks such as no. 19. Compassionate Image of Smell, no. 20 Soothing Rhythm Breathing, and no.21 Loving Kindness

Ways to be kinder to ourselves:

- Talk to ourselves in a gentle way, much as we would speak to a loved one or a small child.
- Think to yourself, “What would I do if this was a friend?”
- Use compassionate imagery, there are some mindfulness practices that include this which can be found on the Compassionate Mind website
- Use kind self-touch such as placing a hand gently on top of a painful area, or applying some hand cream and giving our hands a massage.
- Do kind deeds for ourselves or others
- Spend quality time with people who treat us well.
- A simple self-soothing exercise is to use a smell that gives you a sense of well-being (essential oils, candles, clothing of a loved one, your pet, etc). Our sense of smell bypasses the logical brain and taps straight into the areas of the brain connected with emotion, therefore it can quickly help you access feelings of being calm.