Wellbeing

Give yourself a break: Practising self–compassion during isolation

by A M A N D A   W A L L I S

In a matter of a few days, it may feel like everything has changed. Suddenly your living room has become your office and your new "colleagues" are the same people you eat, sleep, and spend every waking hour with. Under COVID-19 isolation protocol, we are having to constantly redefine our sense of "normal" — and there is nothing normal about it.

Practising self-compassion has never been more important as you begin to settle into your new routine. Psychologists define self-compassion as made up of these three aspects:

1. Being kind and understanding toward yourself in times of pain or failure

2. Perceiving your own suffering as part of a larger human experience

3. Holding painful feelings and thoughts in mindful awareness.

There are some myths about self-compassion and what it means. Showing compassion towards yourself is not self-pitying, narcissistic, or selfish. In fact, research shows that self-compassion provides all the same positive side-effects as does self-esteem, through boosting emotional resilience and stability (without any harmful comparisons between yourself and others). According to psychologist Dr Kristin Neff, "It

is a kind, connected, and clear☐sighted way of relating to ourselves even in instances of failure, perceived inadequacy, and imperfection."

So, what does it look like in our day-to-day living?

First, set realistic expectations when it comes to your to-do list. Acknowledge that you probably won't be as productive at home as you are in the office. Not only do you have to overcome the hurdle of new technologies (or juggling childcare while working) but you are also coming to terms with the uncertainty around change (see here for our recent article on coping with grief). This means that you might not be able to move at the same pace as usual. Start slowly by taking this first week of isolation to settle into your routine. At the end of the week, reflect on how many tasks you are realistically able to achieve each day and make sure your daily to-do lists reflect this capacity from then on. Avoid berating yourself if each task does not get completed and, instead, celebrate the things that you did achieve. Think of it as resilience training, where you're building up your emotional resilience skills, just as athletes achieve more as they build their physical resilience training – they don't get there on the first week of training.

Second, think of the bigger picture. You are not alone in your stress right now. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world are struggling with many of the same problems as you are. Realise that your inability to cope right now is not a personal shortcoming or a failure but a product of extraordinary circumstances that are out of your control. Think of what you would say to a friend who is struggling under similar circumstances and extend that same kindness to yourself.

Third, practise patience, kindness, and self-observation. For some this might mean engaging in meditation or mindfulness practices (note that Headspace is offering free meditations at the moment to help you with this). For others, it might come down to simply observing your emotional reactions and frustrations and labelling them for what they are, rather than letting them define you. Identify your own set of coping strategies for dealing with negative emotions when they come up and allow yourself plenty of time to engage in these coping strategies – whatever they are.

Last, remember that self-compassion can mean that you need to turn off your phone for a while and go for a walk around your neighbourhood. We all need time away from work, from other people, from the news headlines, and from the confines of our four walls. Be mindful about what you are giving your energy to and include some caring for yourself – if only for a moment – while you are also caring for others during these uncertain times.