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SELF-COMPASSION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: SELF-CARE AS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT

ABRA VIGNA, PHD
“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

-Audre Lorde
Today’s agenda:
Situation the self-care in our work

- What makes a difference, supports transformation?
- Analyzing root causes of suffering
- Exploring the evidence that self-compassion is essential for mutual liberation and effective mental health services
  - *The lived wisdom*
  - *The peer-reviewed science*
- Strategies for incorporating self-compassion into your practice
What makes therapy effective? (Bruce Wampold, 2013)

- Quality of the intervention? - Nope
- Type of intervention? - Nope
  - Cognitive, behavioral, experiential? = each equally as effective
- Number of degrees and certifications the therapist has? - nope

- The ability to create to create a compassionate alliance with the client-YES!
  - Unconditional positive regard
  - Understanding ..... Why the peer support model is so effective
  - Empathy: feeling felt
  - To my mind, empathy is in itself a healing agent. It is one of the most potent aspects of therapy, because it releases, it confirms, it brings even the most frightened clients into the human race. If a person is understood, he or she belongs” (Carl Rogers, 1986, p. 129).
Compassion can only lead to skillful action when there is true understanding

- “When we apply mindfulness to our suffering, our mind calms and we eventually come to understand its causes. This understanding gives rise to compassion” (Desmond, p. 93).

- The past is always present, just like the 10 year old tree can be seen inside the 100 year old tree

- People suffering from trauma often experience loneliness and alienation and require a deeply felt companionship in order to reorganize the bodily-based remnants of complex trauma (Stanley, 2016)
UNDERSTANDING OUR ROOTS

Radical simply means "grasping things at the root."
~ Angela Davis
Am I enough?
STIGMA as a fundamental cause of Health Disparities

- Label & Stereotype
- Us vs Them
- Status Loss
- Discrimination

Coping with more stress and fewer resources = ill health

Braverman et al., 2011; Hatzenbuhler, Phelan & Link, 2013
AGENT

discriminate  oppress  marginalize  exploit  disenfranchise

TARGET  TARGET  TARGET  TARGET  TARGET
THE TRUE FOCUS OF REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IS NEVER MERELY THE OPPRESSIVE SITUATIONS THAT WE SEEK TO ESCAPE, BUT THAT PIECE OF THE OPPRESSOR WHICH IS PLANTED DEEP WITHIN EACH OF US.

AUDRE LORDE
Implicit Bias

is when you see through the lens of every limitation, judgement, assumption, or idea that has been imposed on you.

It's insidious (inside you: use)

It happens through (intentional or unintentional)

Conditionning

Others

It's smart, it's Bitch, it's Bro, Hot, it's Dumb, Broken, Privileged, Licky, Sad.
Us vs Them Policies harm EVERYONE

Teen suicides attempts drop by 7% among the general population and by 14% among LGB kids between 1995-2015 in states where same-sex marriage was made legal

What value is mindfulness (and self-compassion) in a racially unjust world?

-Angela Davis

- In my own research on the association between SC and resilience to adversity among sexual and gender minority adolescents, I found:
Self-compassion appears to help manage injustice... to a point

- SC a stronger predictor of anxiety levels than bias-based bullying
- At “HIGH” SC, health disparities disappear
- Its relationship with resilience weakens the more adversity one faces
- It cannot overcome the effects of severe adversity

It is likely that stigma impacts health in part by its internalization and reduced SC

- Although sexual and gender minority students had much lower self-compassion rates than did their sexual and gender majority peers
- Among sexual gender minority students, students of color had MUCH higher rates of self-compassion than did white students
- White SGMi students have lowest rates of self-compassion

LOW SC → Highest rates of health risk behaviors
HIGH SC → Lowest rates rates of health risk behaviors

SELF-COMPASSION & LIBERATION

DIVIDE AND CONQUER MUST BECOME DEFINE AND EMPOWER

AUDRE LORDE
Self-compassion as self-soothing

*Non-contingent positive regard is liberating
*Essential for secure base development!
Mindfulness increases awareness of suffering

**If that suffering is not meet with acceptance and warmth, rumination arises in place of integration**
Two Wings Of “Radical Acceptance”

- **The wing of clear seeing**, the quality of awareness that recognizes exactly what is happening in our moment to moment experience.

- **The wing of compassion**, our capacity to relate in a tender and sympathetic way to what we perceive.

  Tara Brach (2003)

My prayer became 'May I find peace... May I love this life no matter what.' I was seeking an inner refuge, an experience of presence and wholeness that could carry me through whatever losses might come.

Tara Brach
A secure base (i.e. true refuge) to do the work: “Embodied reflexivity” (Beth Berila, 2016)

- Embrace your grief
- Reflect on your ideologies and experiences,
- Question ways of thinking
- Welcome awareness of your full humanity
- Imagine alternatives
- Commit to doing better

Self-Compassion may increase capacity for sustained transformation
To change it we must see it
Self-Compassion Increases Distress Stamina

- Less likely to report feel overwhelmed when confronted with the suffering of others (Neff & Pommier, 2013)

- Increases in SC associated with reductions in thought suppression ((Neff, Kirckpatrick & Rude, 2007)
Self-Compassion is associated with Compassion for Others & Taking Action

- Self-compassion and other-focused concern go hand in hand (Longe et al., 2010)

- More likely to help a person in distress (Mikulincer, Shaver, et al., 2005)
Self-compassion is associated with a sense of inter-connection

“Like many people, I struggle.....”
(Neff, Kirckpatrick & Rude, 2007)
Self-compassion increases personal accountability

• Linked to perspective taking
  (Neff & Pommier, 2013)

• More willing to accept responsibility for failures without feeling super distressed about failing
  (Leary et al., 2007)

• More likely to admit mistakes and make amends
  (Breines & Chen, 2013; Leary et al., 2007; Neff & Vonk, 2009)

White Fragility (n):

"A state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include outward display of emotions such as fear and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation."
Accepting our responses is not the same thing as accepting oppression.

- Rather than perpetuating violence, we befriend our experiences
- This counters the separation and Othering that uphold oppressive systems (decolonizingyoga.com)
- More likely to take chances; less fear of failure (Neff, Hseih & Dejittirat, 2005)
Holding Compassion for Self-Criticism:

It has its purpose!

- Maintain connection/Protecting a relationship
- Maintain a the illusion of control
- Maintain a fairness
- Avoiding responsibility for life
Dramaturgical Triangle
A common external and internal dynamic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Body Language</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I cannot begin to tell you have upset I am!”</td>
<td>Defensive, making self small, tearful</td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Cheer up, what’s up with you?”</td>
<td>Reassuring, concerned, trying to get close to him</td>
<td>Rescuer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“What’s up with me? As if you don’t know what’s up with me?!”</td>
<td>Pointing finger, furrowed brow, tension in shoulders</td>
<td>Persecutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Alright! Calm down, I’m only trying to help you! You don’t need to get so angry with me!”</td>
<td>Hands in air, look of shock, stern expression. Most defensive posture</td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HOW DO I GET OFF THE TRIANGLE?

Perpetrator
Rescuer
Victim

SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES
BE ASSERTIVE
PRACTICE SELF-CARE

Leader, Challenger, Motivator
Nurturer, Supporter, Coach
Survivor, Thriver
Rescuer becomes Caregiver
I am OK and YOU are OK

or

I am NOT OK, YOU are NOT OK - and that is OK

Persecutor becomes Empowerer
I am OK and YOU are OK

Victim becomes Survivor
I am OK and YOU are OK
HOW IS SELF-COMPASSION DIFFERENT FROM SELF-ESTEEM?
Self-Esteem is ME-focused

- Based upon comparison to others or congruence with ideal standards (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001)
- Emphasizes what makes you unique

Self-Compassion is WE-focused

- Based upon unconditional self-worth (Neff, 2003a)
- Emphasizes that you are NOT uniquely flawed
SC has all of the benefits of SE and none of the drawbacks

- Correlates with narcissism (Neff, 2003; Neff & Vonk, 2009)
- Attempts to protect self-esteem may cause distortions in self-knowledge (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Sedikides, 1993; Taylor & Brown, 1988)
- Is difficult to improve (Swann, 1996; Baumeister et al., 2003)
- Associated with increased prejudice towards out-groups (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Allport, 1954; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987)

- Has no association with narcissism once self-esteem is taken into account (Neff & Vonk, 2009)
- See self more accurately; less likely to self-enhance or deprecate when receive negative feedback (Leary et al., 2007)
- Inductions increase one’s sense of similarity with others (Leary et al., 2007)
- More likely to admit mistakes and make amends; hold greater compassion for others (Breines & Chen, 2013; Leary et al., 2007; Neff & Vonk, 2009)
HOW DOES IT “WORK?”

It changes the narrative
Helps you to recognize patterns, de-identify with the narrative

Cognitively reframes interpretation of the stress
Self-Compassion Reduces Rumination (Galla, 2016)

Self-pity tends to overemphasizes the uniqueness of one’s pain. In self-pity, we are defined by our pain.

Self-compassion, emphasizes connection in pain and non-judgmental awareness of thoughts as non-defining.
Reduces the physiological stress response to social evaluative threat

Generating a soothing response activates the parasympathetic system, thus acting as an emotional “approach” strategy

Arch et al., 2014; Bluth, Roberson & Gaylord, 2015; Bluth et al., 2016; Breines et al., 2014; 2016; Gilbert 2005; Gilbert and Procter 2006
Integrating Self-Compassion into your work

(7 principles by Tim Desmond)

1. Connect with the client’s goals
2. Maintain the motivational boundary:
   "Accept the client exactly as they are and be happy to help them change"
3. Improvise and experiment; adapt to the needs of the client
4. Be authentic: be curious and ask questions/beginner’s mind
   "This might help, but it might not. Shall we try?"
5. Empathy: Put yourself in the client’s shoes
6. Our practice is our own best guide
7. Have the client experience a practice before you explain it, but don’t deceive them
   "Would you like to try an exercise to see if we can understand your anxiety a little better?"
For more information:

Watch a conversation between Angela Davis and Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center on the use/purpose of mindfulness in social justice.

- Contemplative Practices can ASSIST structural change
- Mindfulness as institutional aikido a method for cultivating WE

If you’ve come to help me, you’re wasting your time. But if you’ve come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

Lilla Watson, Aboriginal educator & activist, Australia
Resources

- [http://Selfcompassion.org](http://Selfcompassion.org) – Kristen Neff’s resource site
- [http://www.mindfulselfcompassion.org](http://www.mindfulselfcompassion.org) – Christopher Germer’s resource site
- [http://Tarabrach.com](http://Tarabrach.com) – Internationally renowned Buddhist Psychologist
- [https://www.timdesmond.net/](https://www.timdesmond.net/) – Offers web-based trainings and consultation
Resources for training in contemplative, anti-racist work

mindfulnessforthepeople.org

Mind-Body Racial Resilience

The Institute for Radical Re-Imagining™
Compassion-Based Racial Stamina Building™
by Mindfulness for the People
Thank you for your time!