

# Hands Over Heart

A Self-help Tool

## Introduction

Compassion means taking kind, tender and caring action to help someone in distress. Compassion has been defined as “the noticing of distress and/or disadvantage to self or others, and a commitment to take action to reduce it.” (Gilbert, 2005; Goetz et al., 2010, as cited in Gilbert, 2016)

Compassion may be directed towards another person, or in the case of self-compassion, ourselves. And we all need it because, as REM (the pop group) put it, ‘Everybody hurts sometimes...’. There’s a lot of things that hurt: a low mark; an unsuccessful job interview; a mistake at work, for example.

So, what's the best way to respond to setbacks? Some writers urge you to 'bounce back' because, according to them, 'what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger'. And if that works for you; fine. But a growing body of research suggests that being compassionate towards ourselves is a better way to handle difficult experiences.

Germer and Neff (2019), drawing on a wide range of studies, conclude that people who are self-compassionate are more likely to take personal responsibility for mistakes they've made; have stronger motivation to improve; and better emotional reactions to failures (pp.39-41). Citing a study by Breines and Chen (2012), they describe that students who responded with self-compassion after a difficult exam spent longer studying for the next one (and did better) than students who weren't compassionate towards themselves.

This guide, 'Hands Over Heart,' will introduce you to two very similar techniques. The first is adapted from Linda Graham (2023), and the second from Germer and Neff's 'Self-Compassion Break' (2019). Both are easy ways to make space for self-compassion when you are in a difficult situation. Just like a coffee-break when you're studying or working, space for self-compassion gives you time to recharge and refresh.



## **This tool is designed to...**

- Help you access self-compassionate feelings.
- Be quick and easy to use.
- Teach you the essential aspects of self-compassion.

## **Consider using this tool if you...**

- Are in a distressing or difficult situation.
- Need to recover from a mistake or failure.
- Have a tendency to be hard on yourself.

## How to use this tool:

NB. You'll find it easier to use this exercise if you practice a few times. While you can use this technique with any situation that you want to, to practise, choose something that is low to moderately difficult for you to begin with. Once you've decided what the difficult situation is that you want to address, you're ready to begin.



### Version 1: Linda Graham

Ideally, find somewhere you can be alone and quiet and, if possible, where you can close your eyes for this meditative exercise.

**1** First, think of a time when you felt completely accepted and loved.

This sense of complete acceptance might have been from a friend, a family member, or a pet. It may be from any source, real or imagined. And it doesn't matter if the experience was recent or far in the past. Call it to mind vividly, and re-live it. Remember what it felt like, and re-experience the kindness and compassion that you experienced.

**2**

**Second. Place one or both hands over your heart, or wherever on your body you feel comfortable with.**

Let them rest there. Feel the warmth of your hands as they rest tenderly over your heart. Then take three slow, deep breaths.

**3**

**Third, ask yourself: ‘What do I need to hear at this moment to express compassion and acceptance to myself?’**

Wait to see what words arise. These could be words you want to say to yourself, or words you’d like to hear from a supportive person. Keep your hands in place and, while still breathing deeply, hear yourself say the words you need to hear, either out loud or in your head.

Take three more deep breaths and, when you are ready, open your eyes.

- What were the kind and wise words you said to yourself?
- How can you hold on to them?
- How can you remind yourself of them during the rest of the day / week?



## Version 2: Germer and Neff

This exercise places a greater emphasis upon accepting difficult emotions at the start and then moving to self-compassion. It is also a bit more flexible and can be done quickly in the midst of a busy day, as long as you can snatch a few minutes to yourself.

1

**First, mindfully acknowledge the difficult situation you're in.**

Bring to mind the difficult experience. Let yourself feel the troubling emotions that arise. You may sense these emotions in a particular part of your body. Mindfully accept these difficult feelings without trying to push them away or pretend they don't exist. While feelings are real, remember that you are bigger than any one feeling.



**2**

**Second, acknowledge that this is a difficult experience for you.**

You can do this by saying ‘this is a moment of suffering’, or by using your own phrase. If possible, say this out loud, slowly and clearly. Some people find it helps to make this real by using their own name and referring to themselves in the third person. To illustrate: ‘This is an upsetting experience for Jo.’

**3**

**Third, acknowledge that your suffering is part of the wider human experience.**

This is an important step because it connects your sense of compassion for yourself with the feelings that we share as fragile, vulnerable humans. We can easily judge ourselves more harshly than we judge others. This step reminds us of our common humanity. It endorses the reality of anyone’s suffering, ours included, as valid and a reaction to tough times.

Useful phrases here include: ‘It’s natural and normal for someone to find X hard’; ‘This would make others upset too’; ‘Suffering is a part of life.’ Find a phrase that you feel comfortable with.



# 4

## Fourth, give yourself some compassion.

This is a vital step, so to emphasise it say, 'I need to be kind to myself right now.'

Think about what you need to do to be kind to yourself. There are many things you might do. For instance:

- Time out (e.g. a short walk in nature, listening to uplifting music).
- A mindful grounding exercise that brings you back into the present.
- Doing something that expresses care for yourself and your body (e.g.: you might stroke your arm in a caring way, make a cup of coffee, brush your hair, put on a warm jumper if you're feeling cold, or go for a run).
- Reconnect with a source of love and hope (e.g. look at a photo of someone who is important to you, recall a precious memory).
- Manage your 'inner dialogue' so you feed yourself supportive and kind messages. For this, you can use the approach in the first technique. Ask yourself, 'What do I need to hear at this moment to express compassion and acceptance to myself?'
- Wait to see what words arise. Hear yourself say the words you need to hear, in your head or, if appropriate, out loud.
  - What were the kind and wise words you said to yourself?
  - How can you hold on to them?
  - How can you remind yourself of them during the rest of the day / week?





# Pause, Reflect, Act

- How did these exercises make you feel?
- If you compare them, what were the differences for you?
- Did one seem more helpful than the other, or were they both useful but in different contexts?
- How might you build self-compassion exercises into your daily / weekly routines?
- What actions do you need to take now to build on this exercise?
- Who could help you with this?
- Are there other related Self-help Tools you'd like to use as well?

**NB: Because everyone is different and no one solution on its own is necessarily a magic bullet, please look at our other Self-help Tools as well, and use the ones that work best for you.**



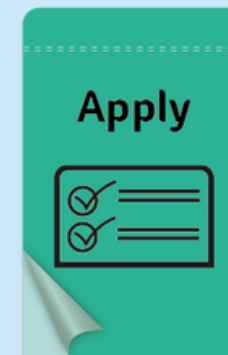
# References and Resources

Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2012). Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(9), 1133-1143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167212445599>

Germer, C., & Neff, K. (2019). *Teaching the Mindful Self-Compassion Program; A Guide for Professionals*. The Guilford Press.

Gilbert, T. (2016). Assess compassion in Higher Education? Why and how would we do that? *LINK 2016*, 2 (1). University of Hertfordshire. <https://www.herts.ac.uk/link/volume-2,-issue-1/assess-compassion-in-higher-education-how-and-why-would-we-do-that>

Graham, L. (2023). *Hand on the Heart*. Linda Graham MFT. Retrieved May 28th, 2023 from <https://lindagraham-mft.net/hand-on-the-heart/>



If you are a member of staff from another educational organisation and want to use a limited number of our Self-help Tools with your students, we would love to hear from you and share good practice. We would ask that you retain references to University of Huddersfield as a matter of courtesy, and acknowledge the other sources we have used. Thank you.