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A minute of mindful self-compassion

Vira Salzburn walks us through the act of showing up for yourself

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We’re living through a very difficult, uncertain time right now. The collective fear and anxiety we feel can be paralyzing, and we don’t need to look far to find someone who’s been affected by the pandemic, either by contracting the virus or by losing their jobs.

Keeping ourselves informed can also lead us down a spiral of bad news, as anyone with an active Facebook or Twitter account can attest.

Vira Salzburn, program director of Prevent Suicide Today at Chatham County Safety Net, knows the importance of mindful self-compassion in times like these.

Salzburn originally came across the idea of mindful self-compassion, pioneered by Drs. Chris Germer and Kristin Neff, as she was seeking to support herself emotionally.

“It started with a personal need, honestly,” says Salzburn, “to cope with difficult emotions and stress and burnout. Once I took training and became familiar with it, I was like, ‘Wow, we can bring this to our community and program.’”

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As the title implies, mindful self-compassion asks you to show compassion to yourself, just as you would a friend.

“You can start thinking about self-compassion by thinking, what is compassion?” explains Salzburn. “It’s noticing



Vira Salzburn knows how important a minute of mindful self-compassion can be.

someone else's suffering and having the desire to alleviate that suffering, and taking some practical action steps to alleviate that suffering. Self-compassion, then, would be compassion turned inwards—noticing when I am suffering.”

The first part of mindful self-compassion is mindfulness. It's important to be attuned to your body, both emotionally and physically, to notice when you're struggling.

“I think it's so easy to get entangled into a story that we have in our head or that we hear on the news,” says Salzburn. “It turns into this ruminative type of thinking—basically you're stuck thinking over and over and over about things that are probably negative, which can impact your physical and emotional health. Mindfulness helps us unstuck from really negative thoughts or emotion. Mindfulness helps us create a little more spacious awareness of what's really happening.”

Salzburn recommends body scan meditation, which is the practice of noticing tension in your body from head to toe. Begin with your head: are you clenching your jaw or furrowing your brow? Are your shoulders hunched? Move down your body, paying attention to each part of your body and releasing the tension you may feel.

“The mindful awareness of your body sensations is one of the first steps of getting in touch with yourself,” says Salzburn. “Mindfulness also involves curiosity, so maybe ask yourself really what is it I'm feeling right now? Label that emotion a little more specifically. You might label it as stress or sad or upset, but is it fear? Is it confusion?”

Once you name the emotion you feel, you can validate your feelings and begin to process them better.

The next component is the idea of common humanity, or the fact that we're all in it together.

“It's reminding yourself that, just like me, other people are suffering right now as well,” says Salzburn. “Right now, we must be physically isolated from each other because of the health guidelines, and that's very difficult, but can we perceive that as actually not being emotionally isolated from each other? Are we interconnected by collaborating and cooperating with each other? It's easy to start going into that mindset of, ‘Oh, poor me, my life sucks.’ Remember that other people are struggling, but also include yourself in that circle of empathy and compassion.”

The feeling of community can help us feel not alone, particularly during these times of quarantine and social distancing, which can make us feel lonely.

The third part is self-kindness, and Salzburn says it begins with recognizing your needs.

“What do I need right now to be kind to myself and take care of myself?” she asks. “The answer can come in different ways because self-compassion is about being with yourself in a tender way, but it’s also about being active and supportive and strong.”

By paying attention to your emotional and physical body, you’ll have a good sense of what you need to do for yourself, whether it’s giving yourself a soothing touch or calling a friend.

Self-compassion also means protecting yourself, particularly in stressful times like these.

“We have to protect ourselves from negative emotions and negative sources of information, because our brain has the tendency to stick to negative emotions more easily,” explains Salzburn. “We can be intentional about cultivating positive emotions and encouraging ourselves. One way you can cultivate positive emotion is by practicing gratitude, for big things in life but also for small things. Can you be thankful for your tea kettle in the kitchen? Can you be thankful for this convenient tea bag?”

However, Salzburn notes that cultivating positive emotion does not mean being naive or oblivious to what’s going on around you.

“What it means is actually doing something for your own resilience and well-being. Self-compassion is a resiliency resource,” she explains. “Take a self-compassion break. Sometimes that starts with the negative, noticing, ‘Wow, this is really hard for me.’ Mindfulness: ‘Wow, other people struggle this way too, I’m not alone.’ And finally, self-kindness. ‘What do I need to be kind to myself?’”

For a simple method, Salzburn recommends the PARK model: Pause your brain, Ask yourself what you need, Read your physical and emotional body, and Kindly respond to yourself and others.

Before the pandemic came to our community, Salzburn had plans in place to teach mindful self-compassion at schools and to first responders. As soon as it’s safe to do so, she’ll resurrect those plans, but in the meantime, she’s in the process of creating online sessions to help as many people as she can.

For those sessions, and to learn more about mindful self-compassion, visit their website at chatham safetynet.org, their Facebook at Prevent Suicide Today, or email Salzburn at virasalzburn@chslink.org.

Tags: Community, Mindful self-compassion, Vira Salzburn, Prevent Suicide Today, Chatham County Safety Net