



Entertainment & Life

Mindful self-compassion could help ease coronavirus anxieties

By Steven Alford / for Savannah Morning News

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As coronavirus fear grips the nation; when jobs and lives are placed on hold, keeping our anxieties in check is crucial, according to health experts.

A calm spirit and a relaxed outlook can not only brighten your mood but might actually have tangible health benefits for the long run.

Vira Salzburn is the program director for Prevent Suicide Today at the Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council, counseling those with suicidal thoughts to help find meaning in their lives.

Over the past year she has studied the practice of Mindful Self-Compassion, a daily exercise which she says can help ease many of the woes Americans are facing during the current outbreak.

“This is the time right now for us when we are struggling with this pandemic, when fear grabs our throat quite literally; this is the opportunity for self-compassion more than ever,” Salzburn shared.

The concept of Mindful Self-Compassion was first developed by mental health professionals Chris Germer and Kristin Neff. It’s an evidenced-based program they say can teach people to be more resilient and cope with difficult emotions and experiences.

Last year, Salzburn happened upon a book about the practice and was intrigued. She soon enrolled in training as a Mindful Self-Compassion teacher, one of just two credentialed MSC teachers in Georgia.

She now coaches other mental health professionals in Chatham County in the calming and meditative practice, as well as teachers and emergency responders. Salzburn says the first step in calming anxieties during difficult times like these is the act of self-compassion.

Compassion itself is the emotion of recognizing someone else’s suffering and evoking a desire to alleviate that pain. With self-compassion, that outreach is turned inward.

“With this pandemic we are going through, it’s important to recognize the human component of what we are all experiencing,” Salzburn said. “Recognize that this is hard for you and validate your own feelings.”

By recognizing others are suffering the same as you, we can allow ourselves the same kindness and support we would provide for any friend or loved one, she said.

“Ask yourself: What advice would I give to a friend in this situation? What words would I use? What would be my tone?” Salzburn said. “Try comforting yourself in the same way.”

By recognizing our own suffering and addressing underlying feelings – pain, anger, fear – people can accept the situation at hand and look for peace in their daily lives, she shared.

The second step in the practice of Mindful Self-Compassion is mindfulness – recognizing our experience, not just our feelings. The theory purposes that resistance to difficulty causes suffering.

“With the coronavirus people may be resisting their situation – constantly thinking ‘I don’t want to be here, I don’t want to feel this,’” Salzburn said.

If we address the situation, accept it and stay mindful of the things in our lives that are positive – our home, our family, our friends – we can stay upbeat and keep our emotions positive, Salzburn advises.

This includes being mindful of cues from your body indicating stress whether clenching your jaw or feeling tightness in your chest – these can all be physical manifestations of fear and anxiety.

So how do we cope with the constantly unfolding crisis at hand? Salzburn said take it one day at a time and seek comfort in the little things.

“Become grateful for small things in life – a smell of a candle at your home, a family picture you have had for a long time on your wall, or going out for a walk around your yard,” she advised.

These seemingly insignificant things can still make life easier and more pleasant for ourselves, she said.

By taking the time for compassion and self-care, it will not only improve your mental health, but it could improve your overall health as well, Salzburn said.

And while local Mindful Self-Compassion classes have slowed — as many other community activities during this time of self-distancing — Salzburn plans to post free online videos to guide others to peace during the coronavirus outbreak.

For more information about Mindful Self-Compassion and coping techniques, visit online at chathamssafetynet.org.

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