

True Strength:

A Compassion-Focused Therapy Approach
for Working with Anger

By Russell Kolts, Ph.D.

Acknowledgements

This manual is based upon Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) Model, developed by Paul Gilbert, and much of its content was adapted from resources developed by Dr. Gilbert in his work with CFT and Compassionate Mind Training. Interested readers are encouraged to read Dr. Gilbert's book, *The Compassionate Mind*, as well as *The Compassionate Mind Guide to Managing Your Anger*, by myself. Dr. Christopher Germer's excellent book *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion* was also influential.

Specifically with regard to anger, the development of this manual was also influenced by Howard Kassinove and Raymond Chip Tafrate's *Anger Management*, and a number of the exercises in the latter third of the manual are influenced by those presented in Dr. Kassinove and Tafrate's book. Once again, the interested reader is encouraged to read books and research articles by these authors, and their colleague, Raymond DiGiuseppe.

My thinking around using compassion-based approaches in working with anger was heavily influenced both by historical Buddhist teachers as well as contemporary works by the Venerable Thubten Chodron and Pema Chodron, two North American Buddhist nuns, as well as works by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Matthieu Ricard. The reader is referred to their numerous works which feature ways of working with difficult emotions that are rooted in compassion and kindness, in particular Ven. Chodron's excellent *Working With Anger*.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the men of the Gateless Sangha at Airway Heights Correctional Center (AHCC), and the men who participated in the initial run of the group. They provided both the initial inspiration for this manual as well as valuable feedback in shaping its current form. If you find that you benefit from this manual, please direct your gratitude to Dr. Gilbert and those historical and current teachers, practitioners, and scholars whose work made this one possible. All errors are my own.

Introduction

Welcome to Compassion-Focused Therapy for working with anger. We call this group “True Strength,” because our goal isn’t just to work with anger, but to learn to develop a new type of strength within ourselves – the strength of compassion.

It is wonderful to have you here. While we all come from different backgrounds and have different experiences, that you are here means you are interested in learning new ways to work with difficult emotions like anger, and perhaps, in becoming a kinder, happier person. In coming here, you’ve shown courage and strength, because dealing with anger and other difficult emotions isn’t easy.

It can feel very vulnerable talking about anger and other feelings, so we’ll start by getting to know one another a bit. You’ll have a chance to share a bit about yourself, and maybe say something about what you hope to get from the group. Once we’ve introduced ourselves, we’ll move on to thinking about how we’d like to work together. We’ll also see if we can think of some guidelines to help us work together in a way that helps us all feel safe as we learn to work with anger and other emotions.

We’ll spend a good deal of time in these first few sessions exploring the Compassionate Mind model, which looks at how our brains evolved, how this can create problems for us, and how we can work with them. We will learn, for example, why experiencing intense feelings of anger is often not our fault – it is due to the way our brains, like those of other animals, have been shaped by evolution. Like other animals, we can experience a whole range of very powerful emotions that can be difficult to regulate.

However, unlike animals, we can learn to understand our emotions and take responsibility for them by becoming mindful and more aware of how anger works in us, by developing compassion, and by learning to make genuine decisions about how we want to act in the world. In this way, we can learn to exert more control over our anger, rather than having our anger control us. This manual will outline what we’ll be doing so that you can follow along, because we’ll be referring to some of these ideas over and over as we go through the group.

We also want you to contribute to the development of this approach. Anger causes difficulties for many humans throughout the world, and our goal is to find ways to help people with these problems and to make the world a more peaceful place. You can help us do this by sharing your thoughts about the therapy, to help us build and improve it.

At the end of the day, this therapy is only useful if it helps people like you – so you can think of yourselves as test drivers, helping us to test out the model, to see which parts can work for you and which parts need improving. Don't just accept things because we say them – test them out, find out how they can work for you, and let us know what works for you and what doesn't. You can help us learn the best ways to bring compassion into our lives and to work well with anger.

Session 1: Introduction to Compassion-Focused Therapy for Anger

Introductions:

Let's get to know a bit about each other. We'll take a little time to introduce ourselves and share a bit of information, like where we are from, some of the things we are interested in, and perhaps what led us to participate in this group.

Group Guidelines:

Talking about our emotions can be difficult or even feel shameful, particularly when we aren't used to it. It doesn't have to be, though. In fact, sharing emotions (even unwanted ones) can be very helpful, if we feel *safe*. So as we get started, we need to find a way that we can feel safe together.

We're all in the same boat – we're all human beings trying to learn how to deal with difficult emotions and situations – and the purpose of doing this as a group is not only to help ourselves, but to help one another.

So let's think about how we would need to treat one another to create a place where we can really share. What would really help you to feel safe and be able to engage things that you find difficult but want to get a handle on? Let's take a little time thinking about what things might help the group run smoothly, and develop some ideas about how we can work well with one another.

The Compassion-Focused Therapy Approach to Working with Anger

This model starts with the understanding that we are evolved beings with brains that share many basic emotions and desires with other animals on this planet. We were born with this brain and its capacity for difficult emotions like anger, anxiety, joy, or lust – and having a human life means that we all have to cope with these sorts of emotions from time to time.

It is important to recognize that we all just find ourselves here – with a brain that creates all kinds of powerful emotions that we did not choose or design. And we are born into social conditions we didn't choose but which play a large part in shaping our behaviors, values, and emotional reactions. In recognizing this, we can become aware that much of what goes on in our minds is not our fault – we didn't choose or intend to be this way. However, if we want to live more peaceful, happy lives, it can be useful to understand our minds better, so that we can learn ways to take responsibility for working with the difficult experiences our minds and brains can create, and for how we treat others.

Our sessions will unfold in the following way:

1. We will learn about how and why our minds work the way they do.
2. We will learn about anger: what it is, where it comes from, what its functions are, its typical triggers and patterns.
 - Anger is an important emotion that works pretty much the same way in all of us, but sometimes its volume is so loud that it can drown our other emotions and blind us to possibilities for thinking and acting. We will be learning helpful ways of relating to anger.

3. We will learn what compassion is and how it can help us with our difficulties.
 - Right from the start, I should say that people often think that compassion is about becoming weaker, being soft, or letting ourselves off the hook...like it is sort of pink and fluffy. This is a misunderstanding. True compassion is no easy option. Compassion often requires us to be quite strong, honest and truthful; it requires us to learn to tolerate pain and difficulty. Compassion can never come from weakness, submission, avoidance, running away, covering up, or simply acting out our anger or aggression to avoid feeling threatened. Compassion is actually a form of strength, and it takes courage to be compassionate.
 - While anger is commonly linked to threats, compassion is related to a very different set of emotions, ways of thinking, and ways of behaving.
4. We will learn and practice various exercises for developing compassion and bringing compassionate understanding to our experiences of anger.
 - You've probably heard about "working out" your bodies, so that they can be strong, flexible, and healthy. We're going to learn how to "work out" our minds, so that they can be strong, flexible, healthy, **and** peaceful and happy!

In Compassion-Focused Therapy, we will use specific methods for learning to work with our minds and our anger.

Here are some of the methods we'll use:

- Developing Mindfulness. Mindfulness involves being able to observe our emotions and thoughts as they arise, and being able to accept and work with difficult emotions.
 - Noticing our difficult emotions (like anger) as they arise gives us the chance to step back and decide what to do with them, rather than being controlled by them – lashing out or shutting down.
 - Mindfully working with difficult emotions will help us learn to endure the discomfort that comes from not acting on our anger. Anger comes with a strong motivation to act, and resisting this is uncomfortable. Mindfulness will help us work with this discomfort.
- Developing compassion for ourselves and for other people. When we experience compassion, we operate from a position of kindness and confident caring, rather than defensiveness and anger.
 - Directing compassion toward ourselves can help us to self-soothe, feel more comfortable, and work with the distress and negative feelings that fuel our anger.
 - Directing compassion toward others can help us to better understand their actions, and reduce our tendency to experience anger as a result.

- Develop Skillful ways of dealing with anger and conflict situations.
 - We'll learn exercises to help us calm the arousal in our bodies that drives anger, and ways to cope with situations that provoke it.
 - Assertiveness and effective social skills help us to meet our needs without the unwanted consequences of anger or passiveness, with a higher chance of getting our needs met.

An Introduction to Mindfulness

Sometimes when people think about working with difficult emotions like anger, they think it's a matter of willpower, like we should just decide to behave differently, and then do it. It's not that easy!

Our anger is a biologically based threat response that is linked with well-learned patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Once they're set, these patterns can come up almost automatically...it's like a "path of least resistance" in our brains. We can change this!

We can learn to interrupt and change the patterns that cause us difficulty, and a good way to start is by learning to *recognize the movements in our mind* that signal them. This is actually a pretty difficult, advanced thing to do, so we're going to start working on it right in the beginning. We will do this by learning a skill called mindfulness.

Learning mindfulness will help us to do two things:

- **Learn to work with our attention**, by placing it where we want it and learning to keep it there. Many of us find that usually our attention jumps all over the place very rapidly, without our control, and anger tends to fix our attention on the things that are keeping us angry! Mindfulness helps

learn to control the “spotlight” of our attention and keep it where we want it.

- **Controlling our attention is very important in working with anger.**
When we are caught up in anger, it is because our attention has been captured by a source of threat or frustration.
- Mindfulness can help us to empower ourselves – so that we control where our attention is placed, rather than having our angry threat response control it for us.
- **Learn to notice thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations** as they come up. A lot of the time, our thoughts or feelings can completely capture our attention – they feel like “reality,” rather than just mental events. Mindfulness helps us learn to notice when thoughts, feelings, and sensations appear, and to recognize that as powerful as they may seem, these things are simply events happening in our mind.

We’re introducing Mindfulness on the first day because it is a skill, and just like any complicated skill, it takes practice to be used well. So here’s our first mindfulness exercise. We call it an “exercise” because that’s just what it is – working out for our mind!

Exercise: Mindful Breathing

This Mindfulness exercise involves pausing, watching our breath, and noticing when our attention leaves our breath (for example, because we get lost in thoughts, distracted by a sensation inside or outside ourselves, or caught up in an emotion).

How to do it:

- First, sit comfortably. Place your feet shoulder-width apart, flat on the ground. If you don't have anywhere to sit comfortably, then lying down is alright. The point is to be physically comfortable, but not to fall asleep.
- Now **gently focus your attention on your breath**. Breathe so that the air enters your diaphragm – just at the bottom of your ribcage. Notice your abdomen rising and falling as you breathe in and out. Just watch your breath for about 30 seconds.
- What did you notice? If you're like most of us, your mind probably wandered away fairly quickly. You may have had thoughts, like "How is this supposed to help me?" or "I'm hungry. I can't wait to eat." Or maybe "am I doing this right?"
- **The idea is to just watch your breath, and begin to notice when your attention drifts off. When you notice that your attention has left your breath, just gently bring it back to your breath, again and again, over and over.**
- **The fact that your attention wanders off is not a problem.** In fact, a major point of this exercise is to learn to notice when we have thoughts, feelings, and are distracted by sensations. Actually, **we need for our attention to wander, so that we can learn to notice when thoughts and feelings pop up.**
- This can be difficult when we aren't used to sitting quietly, watching our breath.
- For some of us, even sitting quietly can feel uncomfortable...we're so used to "doing."
- In fact, that feeling of discomfort is a good example of a mental event that we can notice (and then gently come back to our breath!).
- **The key is that when our thoughts and emotions come up, we don't judge them...we just notice them as mental events ("Oh...there's another thought") and then come back to the breath.**

- Even though it may seem like we're not doing much, this exercise can be very challenging – but you've done lots of difficult things in your life, and you can do this.
- **There's no such thing as "doing it wrong."** Just keep coming back to your breath, over and over – no matter how many times your thoughts take you away.
- Let's do this for 2 minutes.

Homework for Session 1

Just like anything else, learning to work with difficult emotions like anger requires practice.

Do the "Mindful Breathing" exercise, for at least 2 minutes at a time, 5 days over the next week (once every day, if you can).

- This is designed to help you learn to watch how your mind works.
- If difficult emotions (or distracting thoughts, or bodily sensations, or external distractions....you get the picture!) come up while doing this, notice them, and come back to the breath. Make a note of this on the form below, and we can talk about how to work with this in group.
- Remember, this can be difficult! Don't expect too much from yourself. This is literally *working out* our brains (parts of our brain actually grow from this – the parts that help us work with difficult emotions!).
- Just like when we begin to work out our bodies, we need to start small, be patient with ourselves, and find a routine and rhythm that works for us.

Session 2: The Three-Circles Model

Exercise – Homework Review and Mindfulness Practice

The homework was to do a 2-minute Mindfulness exercise at least 5 times during the past week. Let's touch base about that. We'll start by doing a 5 Minute Mindfulness exercise.

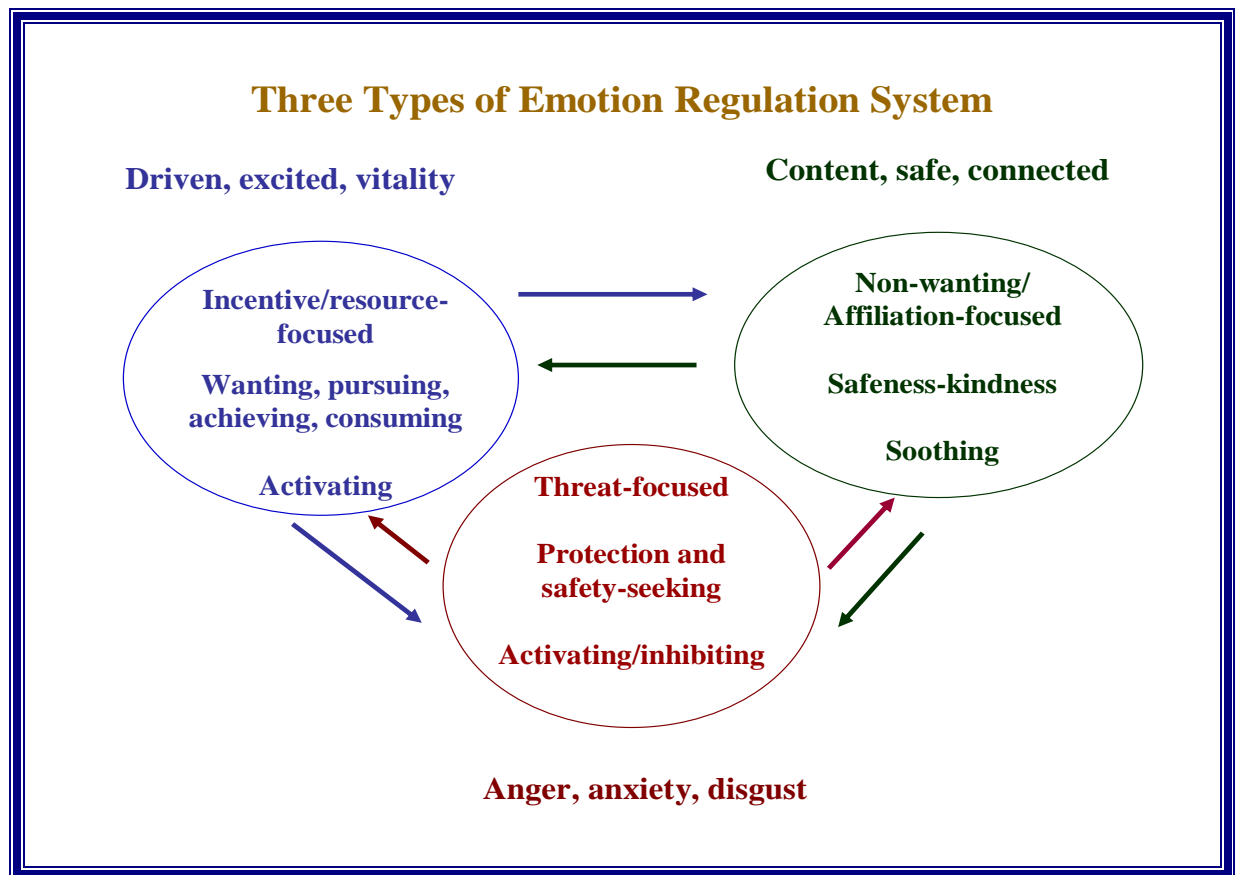
- How is the breathing exercise going for you?
- Are you able to notice when you are taken away by thoughts?
 - Some thoughts take us away from our breath for just a moment, others for a few moments, and others we become completely lost in. This "wandering mind" is normal, and is not a problem. The key is to notice that we have been taken away, perhaps label it: "thinking," and then come back to the breath, over and over.
- What obstacles have you noticed? What gets in the way of the activity?
 - Do you feel like "I just don't like it?" If so, what don't you like?
 - Do you feel like "I'm not doing it right?" What would "doing it right" look like? What are your expectations?
- It is very common to have negative reactions to this exercise in the beginning.
 - We have learned to always be active, and so in the beginning it can feel uncomfortable to sit still, doing almost nothing.
 - You have done many difficult things in your life, however; so you might consider, "is it really so terrible, sitting quietly and watching my breath?"

- Remember – you **will** have distractions. This isn't a bad thing. Noticing when we are taken away is how we learn to watch our minds. The key is to just keep at it.
- Sometimes, difficult memories and emotions can come up while we're doing this. This can be very difficult, but it is also quite normal. When this happens, try to notice the emotion as an activity of your mind, and come back to the breath. It will also be useful to bring these experiences up during group so we can talk about how to work with these experiences.

The Three-Circles Model

The Compassion-Focused approach to working with anger is based on a particular way of thinking about our emotions.

- We view humans as having three emotion regulation systems:



1. The Red System is our threat system. It involves defensive reactions when we feel that we are threatened, and is focused on keeping us safe. It is linked with emotions like anger, fear, anxiety, disgust, and sadness/shutting down.

2. The Blue System is our drive/excitement system. It energizes us around pursuing goals and resources, and is linked with feelings like excitement, desire, and being motivated to achieve.
3. The Green System is our safeness system. It has to do with helping us to feel safe, content, nurtured, and connected with other people and animals. It also involves the motivation to express kindness and to nurture others, and is active when we feel liked, cared for, and safe.

A major focus of Compassion-Focused therapy is to balance these 3 systems, which often involves “moving out of the red and into the green.”

When we are operating out of the red system (for example, caught up in anger):

- We experience lots of **unwanted emotions**.
- We feel **constantly threatened**, with our thoughts and attention focused on threats.
- We have bodily sensations of **tension**, and when it goes on for a long time, pain, digestive difficulties, headaches, and sleep disruption.
- We see few options – our **attention narrows**, and we may feel **“trapped”** or “stuck in a track that we can’t get out of.”
- We have a hard time seeking aid from others, because we’re **on the defensive** and may **feel isolated**.

When we are balanced, and our green system is active:

- We still experience negative emotions, but are **not overwhelmed** by them.
- We can gain and experience some **distance** from our threat emotions, and a sense of **confidence** about being able to work with them.
- We can experience physical **relaxation**, and are able to work with our bodies to release tension.
- We see many options – our attention broadens, and we can **consider** different ways of working with difficult situations, and **decide** which is best.
- We **feel connected** with others, and can access them for help or support.

Mindful “Checking-In”

We can use our mindful awareness to “check-in” on what is going on with us when we’re feeling different emotions. Consider when you are “in the red,” and you feel threatened. These threats can be physical, but more often may be social (based in interactions with others), or psychological (based in a thought that we may have had). You might think of a recent situation in which your threat system was activated.

- How does your body feel? What responses happen in your body when you feel threatened?
- What sorts of emotions are there when you feel threatened?
- What sorts of thoughts are you thinking?

Now let’s think about when you are “in the green,” when you feel safe, cared for, and valued. Try to remember or imagine an experience in which you felt this way. Imagine that you are interacting with someone who cares about you, who likes you, and who values you as a person.

- How does your body feel now? How does it respond when you feel safe?
- What sorts of emotions are happening for you?
- What sorts of thoughts are you thinking?

We can “check-in” at any time – bringing awareness to our bodies, feelings, and thoughts, and how they relate to one another.

You may have noticed that the red (threat) system seems more powerful than the others – that it is easier to feel anger and fear than to feel comfort or safety. There is a reason for this – we evolved with a very highly developed threat system. It works in a “better safe than sorry” sort of way.

It is important to recognize that *our anger and the other threat system responses (like fear and sadness) are biologically-based responses that evolved over millions of years **to help us protect ourselves.***

- These emotions are not a sign that “something is wrong with us” or a symptom of personal weakness.
- We did not choose whether or not to feel them.
- The fact that we feel anger, fear, sadness and other defensive threat emotions is not our fault, but because they are ours - and can negatively impact our lives, we need to take responsibility for managing them.
- We can learn to balance our very active threat systems by working to stimulate our soothing system – by training our brains to respond differently.

Homework for Session 2

Do the “Mindful Breathing” exercise, for at least 5 minutes at a time, 5 days over the next week (once every day, if you can).

- This is designed to help you learn to watch how your mind works.
- If difficult emotions (or distracting thoughts, or bodily sensations, or external distractions....you get the picture!) come up, try to notice them, and come back to the breath. Make a note of this on the form below, and we can talk about how to work with this during group.

Do the “Mindful Checking-In” exercise for 30-seconds to one minute, at least once per day.

- Simply bring your awareness to your body, your emotions, and your thoughts.
- Observe the sensations, without judging them – accepting that “This is what it’s like right now.”
- When you observe troubling emotions or thoughts, see if it’s possible to simply notice these as temporary mental events.
- When you’re done, let these mental experiences go, and redirect your attention elsewhere.

Mindful Breathing Record Form

Days that I practiced the breathing exercise:

___S ___M ___T ___W ___Th ___F ___Sat

What I noticed during my mindful breathing exercises:

Session 3: An Introduction to Compassion

Last week we talked about the 3 Circles Model and learned that the way our minds work can present us with difficulties. We learned that many of our problems have to do with us having very active threat systems, and that we balance our emotional systems by learning to activate our soothing system.

In this model, one way we'll do this involves cultivating compassion, for ourselves and others, based in the knowledge that we all have these difficult minds, and that this is not our fault . Today, we'll

introduce what compassion is, how it can be helpful, and how to develop it.

Right now, you may be wondering, “When are we going to talk about anger? That’s what I’m here for!” Don’t worry - we’ll talk a good deal about anger as we go on, but before we do, we want to explore the Compassionate-Mind approach (which can help us work with lots of difficult emotions and situations – not just anger).

So What is Compassion?

Compassion is based in the idea that we all just want to be happy and to not suffer – that this is the basic motivation that guides all of us.

A common definition of compassion is “being moved by the suffering of oneself and others, and being motivated to reduce that suffering.”

This definition involves two major parts:

- An openness and sensitivity to suffering – we **care** about the suffering and pain of ourselves and others.
- A motivation to reduce it – we **want to help** when we see ourselves or others suffering and in pain.

Compassion is a very different way of dealing with suffering and emotional pain than we may be used to. In our culture, we often receive messages that are the opposite of this, like

- If we are hurting or in pain, that means there is something wrong with us.
- If we or others are having a hard time – it is our (or their) fault, and we should just deal with it.
- If we or others are experiencing emotions like fear or sadness, that means we (or they) are weak, and undeserving of sympathy.
- When life difficulties come up, we should just be able to “tough it out,” without having much difficulty.

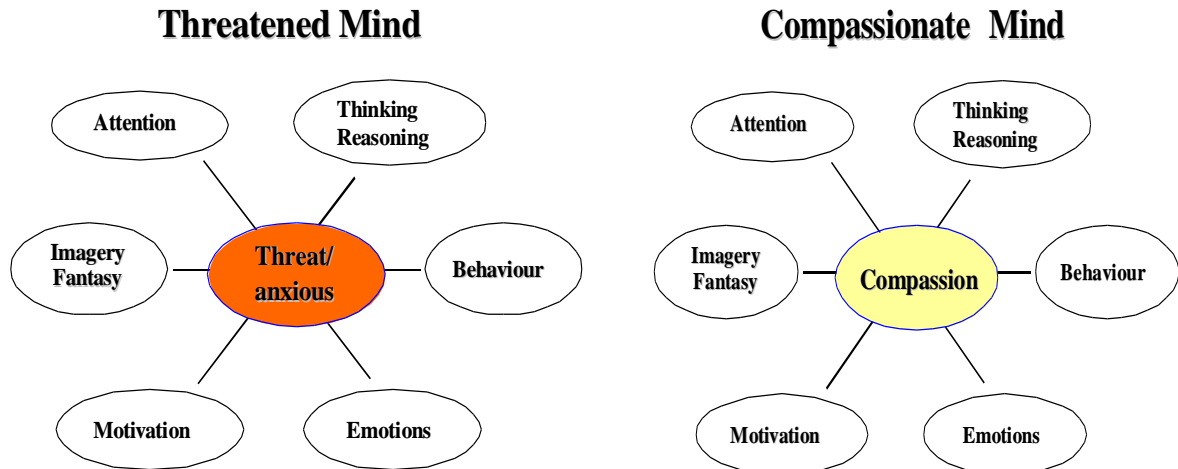
Instead of helping us to work with our emotions, these messages get us caught up in a cycle of blaming and shaming ourselves and other people for having normal human emotions. This is not helpful!

A compassionate approach looks at life very differently:

- It recognizes that life is filled with difficulties, and that we all will feel pain, fear, sadness, anger, loss, grief, difficulties, and broken-heartedness in our lives.
- It recognizes that these are not signs of weakness, but are *normal human experiences*.

- Avoiding, denying, or otherwise refusing to acknowledge and work with these difficulties produces suffering and problems.
- We can live more happily and healthily if we have the courage and the skills to acknowledge these difficulties and work with them directly.

The Compassionate Mind Approach involves learning to develop compassionate ways of relating to ourselves and to other people. While we've learned a definition of compassion, being compassionate involves lots of different factors, just like the threat response involves lots of different factors:



This is why we talk about a “compassionate mind.” A compassionate orientation affects a whole range of different elements of our mind:

- Attention – the things we pay attention to
- Thinking/Reasoning – the ways in which we think about things
- Imagery/Fantasy – how we imagine things playing out in our minds
- Motivation – the things we want to do
- Behavior – the things we actually do
- Emotions – what we feel

Exercise

Think about when you are feeling threatened or angry. Imagine that something has upset you, has gotten in your way, or has caused you to feel threatened or unsafe.

- What do I pay attention to?
- What do I think about?
- What sorts of things am I imagining?
- What am I motivated to do?
- What sorts of things do I do?
- What emotions do I feel?

Now let's try to imagine a compassionate perspective. Imagine that you notice that you or someone that you care about is suffering. Imagine that you are sensitive to that pain, and that you are motivated to help.

- What do I pay attention to?
- What do I think about?
- What sorts of things am I imagining?
- What am I motivated to do?
- What sorts of things do I do?
- What emotions do I feel?

Don't worry if this way of thinking seems a little different or strange. It takes practice to shift from a mindset of blaming to caring, from being upset and frustrated at noticing difficulties to feeling compassionate concern when we see them.

- This is why we see compassion as involving strength and courage, rather than vulnerability – because it is a lot harder to face our difficulties and acknowledge our pain than it is to deny or ignore them.

Don't worry if it seems like you don't really **feel** compassion in the beginning. The key is to try to *imagine what it might be like* to feel compassion toward yourself and others.

- There is often resistance that can come up when we start doing this – that is absolutely normal.
- It's like when we start working out new muscles that we've never used before – it can feel awkward and uncomfortable.

Exercise: Developing the Compassionate Self

There are many different parts of us – represented by certain patterns of activity in our brains. We have angry parts - that think, feel, and want to act in angry ways. We also have anxious parts, “being in love” parts, kind parts – all of which involve ways of thinking, feeling, and the desire to act in certain ways.

Developing the compassionate patterns within ourselves can help us deal with some of our other feelings and patterns that are unpleasant or difficult.

- Compassion can soothe anger and anxiety, and can help us have the courage to face these difficult emotions, to tolerate them, and to deal with them.
- Just like developing any quality, this takes effort – for example, just as becoming a basketball player or a musician takes practice, developing a compassionate self takes practice, too. This practice can help us *become the sort of person we want to be*.
- So let’s consider what a compassionate person might be like. Here are some key qualities:
 - Wisdom – derived from personal experiences
 - Maturity and Insight - into the nature of things and life’s difficulties
 - Strength and Confidence – as in fortitude and courage
 - Great Warmth and Kindness
 - Non-condemning and Non-Judgmental
 - Having a sense of responsibility and the desire to help or to change in positive ways.

This exercise will use the imagination. Imagining can have very powerful effects – for example, anger and fear is often based in imagining and playing out irritating or scary situations in our minds. We're going to use imagination in a positive way.

Think of all the qualities that you would ideally have as a compassionate person. Spend a few minutes on each of the following experiences:

- Focus on your desire to become a compassionate person and think, act, and feel compassionately, spending time on each quality:
 - Imagine being calm and having wisdom.
 - Imagine being aware of what you and others feel.
 - Imagine being confident, having the ability to tolerate difficulties.
 - Imagine being warm and kind.
 - Imagine being non-condemning, but also wanting to help relieve suffering and produce change and happiness.
- Try to create a compassionate facial expression, perhaps a kind half-smile.
- Imagine yourself expanding, as if you are becoming more powerful, mature, and wise.
- Pay attention to the sensations in your body as you develop this part of yourself. Spend a moment just feeling these sensations in your body.
- Think about your tone of voice and the kind of things you'd like to say or do.
- Think about your pleasure in being able to be kind.

Remember, it *doesn't matter if you feel you have these qualities or not – just imagine that you have them*. **Imagine what it would feel like if you did have them**. See yourself having them in your mind, and work through them steadily. Notice how the qualities affect your body. It's ok if you lose focus, or if it feels awkward – developing new skills often feels awkward, like learning to play the piano, to hit a volleyball, or to speak a new language. All of these activities involve learning new patterns – and with all of them, we get better with *practice*.

Homework Review

- How have the Mindful Breathing exercises been going?
- What have you been aware of?
- Remember, the idea is to place your attention on your breath, and when it wanders (you find yourself distracted by thinking or other experiences), just notice, and bring your attention back to the breath.
- Mindfulness can be brought to other activities, like walking, eating, and actually just about anything you might do.

Homework for Session 3

- **Do the “Mindful Breathing” exercise, for at least 5 minutes at a time, 5 days over the next week (once every day, if you can).**
- **Do the “Compassionate Self” exercise at least twice during the next week, for 10 minutes at a time.**
- **Keep track of your practice in the Compassion Practice Journal.**

Compassion Practice Journal

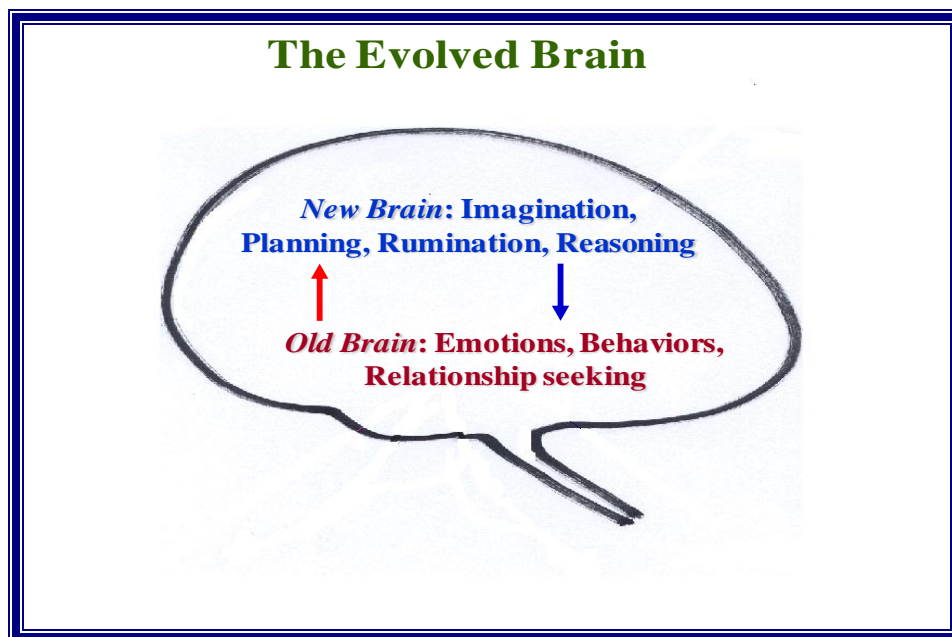
Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Session 4: Getting to Know Anger as a Threat Response

Now that we've discussed the Compassionate Mind model, we'll learn some more specifics about anger. First, we'll talk about how our brain works, because it presents us with some challenges that are very much related to our anger.

We can think of ourselves as having two brains:

- An *old brain*, which gives birth to basic emotions and motivations, like fear, anger, hunger, and the desire to form relationships. The old brain emotion systems are very *powerful*, but are not always very wise.
- A *new brain* which allows us to do more complex things, like planning, imagining, reasoning, ruminating, and thinking about things like "what kind of person am I?" The new brain is much more sophisticated, but can be hijacked by old brain emotions.



This combination of old and new brains can cause us problems.

- Our new brain abilities can be hijacked by old brain emotions.
- For example, our old brain – which *evolved to protect us and is very powerful* in its efforts to do so - can pull us toward threat responses like anger, so that our thoughts and imagination stays focused on the anger and the things that trigger it.
- When this happens, our new brain can create all sorts of images and thoughts that play out in our minds over and over.
- Our powerful emotion centers (old brain) can't always tell the difference between real threats in the outside world and the thoughts and imagery produced by our new brains – so these thoughts and images can act like gasoline, which then fuel the old brain emotion centers – to *keep us angry*.

What is anger?

- Anger is a *defensive threat response* that developed in our ancestors over millions of years, designed to protect us against threats.
- We tend to experience anger as an *emotion* or *feeling* that we have in response to situations that *threaten us* or *get in the way* of us pursuing what we want.
- We tend to feel anger when we see unfairness, when our movement toward something we want is blocked, or we perceive that others are acting to harm or embarrass us.

- We usually don't *choose* to feel anger in these situations – it just *emerges* in us as we feel threatened...this is our brain trying to protect us when we feel unsafe.
- Because of our early learning experiences, we all differ in terms of what situations threaten us and cause us to feel angry – so it's good to learn what situations *our* threat system is extra-sensitive to.
- Sometimes these threats can be physical, sometimes they are social (“he doesn't like me”) or are related to status (“she's trying to make me look bad”) threats and linked to conflicts with other people –but often they are simply blocks and obstacles to what we want to do, which cause frustration.

Discussion Point:

What sorts of situations tend to make me feel angry? What is the threat?

- Some of us suffer from lower frustration tolerance –it doesn't take very much for us to begin to feel anger. In fact, some of us are born with temperaments that make it so we naturally react more strongly to frustrating situations.
- Sometimes low frustration tolerance can be related to other problems such as depression, anxiety, or an inner sense of feeling unsafe, stress, unfairness, injustice in the world, life difficulties such as poverty or

unemployment, or maybe we learned this pattern from our early caretakers.

- The point is that *whatever triggers our anger, the threat system is in control.*

Anger involves a number of bodily sensations, evolved to motivate us toward action.

- Getting to know how anger (and other threat emotions) feel in our bodies can help us learn to recognize them as they come up. Let’s see if we can learn how this happens for us. Learning to work with how our emotions play out in our bodies is a very powerful way of working with them.

Discussion Point – What experiences arise in my body when I feel angry?

How do I know that I am angry?

What specific sensations in my body go along with being angry?

Working with Resistance

- Even as anger and the way we've acted upon it may have caused us many problems, we may be very resistant to changing how we relate to anger.
- Because of the chemicals in our body that fuel anger, it can *feel* powerful.
- We may feel like that if we loosen our connection to our anger, we may be giving up power, making ourselves vulnerable, or giving up motivation to get things done.
- Part of working successfully with anger means being willing to give it up – to let go of it. We may be very reluctant to do this, as anger may have been our companion for a very long time.

We may have fears of changing – after all, we've used anger to protect ourselves for long time, and we can be confused about what our lives will be like if we change. So this leads to an exercise to help us think about our greatest fears of changing :

Discussion Point: What risks might be involved if I let go of the ways I respond in anger? What might I be afraid of losing? What might be threatening about doing this? _____

Exercise: Working with the Three Circles - Soothing Rhythm Breathing

A big part of the Compassion-focused therapy approach to working with difficult emotions like anger is learning to recognize when our threat system is activated and to work with our safeness system to balance it.

We'll be learning several ways to do this – to move “out of the red and into the green,” but first, we need to learn how to notice when our threat system is becoming activated and to calm our minds so that we can work with it.

The first part – the noticing – we are already working on with our mindfulness exercises, and we'll keep practicing this. Now, we're going to learn a way to calm ourselves when we're experiencing a lot of bodily arousal. This method is called Soothing Rhythm Breathing.

Soothing Rhythm Breathing

This exercise is actually quite simple. Like in the mindfulness exercise, we will be focusing on the breath, but in this case, the goal is a bit different. Here, we want to work with the arousal that comes when the threat system is activated and to bring ourselves to a calmer state of mind. Here's the exercise:

- Find a comfortable place to sit, with your feet flat on the ground and with your back relatively straight. This can also be done laying or standing – the point is to find a comfortable position.
- Take a few slow breaths, breathing in through your mouth, filling your lungs, and then breathing out through your nose. Take your time, slowly breathing in for a count of 3, holding the breath in for a count of 3, breathing out for a count of 3, waiting for a count of 3, and then breathing in again. Focus on the sensation of your body and mind slowing down. Notice what that feels like.

- As you breathe, try to allow the air to come down into your diaphragm – that’s just at the bottom of your ribcage in the upside down ‘V’. Feel your diaphragm, the area underneath your ribs, move as you breathe in and out. Just notice your breathing and do an experiment with your breathing. Breathe a little faster or a little slower until you find a breathing pattern that, for you, seems to be your own soothing, comforting rhythm. The key is to focus on the sense of slowing down.
- It is like you are checking in, linking up, with the rhythm within your body that is soothing and calming to you. Now we can spend 30 seconds or so just focusing on our breathing, just noticing the breath coming down into the diaphragm, your diaphragm lifting and then the air moving out, through your nose. Sometimes it’s useful to focus on the point just inside the nose where the air enters. Just focus on that for 30 seconds.
- As with the mindfulness exercise, whenever you notice your mind wandering, just bring it back to the breathing. You might try breathing in through the mouth and out through the nose (or vice-versa, if you prefer), so that you have to concentrate a bit – it is different from how we usually breathe. This can help to focus our attention on our breathing.
- It can help to practice this exercise for at least 30 seconds at a time, several times a day. The idea is to practice when it is easy (when we’re calm and generally relaxed), so that we can use it when you notice your threat system kicking in (heart beginning to race, breathing becoming rapid).

Homework Review

- How have the homework exercises been going?
- What has been helpful or easy about the mindful breathing exercises?
What has been difficult or challenging?
- What has been helpful or easy about the Compassionate Self exercises?
What has been difficult or challenging?

Homework for Session 4

- **Every day, do either the Mindful Breathing exercise or the Compassionate Self exercise, for at least 5 minutes at a time. Make sure you do each exercise at least twice during the week (don't do the same one every day).**
- **Keep track of your practices on the Compassion Practice Journal**
- **Practice the Soothing Rhythm Breathing exercise at least twice per day, for at least 30 seconds at a time (hint: you can do this while standing in line, waiting for other activities to start, and in lots of other settings as well).**

Compassion Practice Journal

Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
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Session 5: Getting to Know the Anger Response

Last week, we discussed that anger is a threat response that evolved to help us protect ourselves, and we learned a little about the experience of our anger – what it feels like in our bodies. However, it is often not the *experience* of anger that is a problem for us.

In fact, what tends to create difficulties for us are the ways we tend to *think* when we are angry (which can fuel the anger and keep it going), and the ways we *behave* when we are angry (what we **do** – which can make things *worse*).

Anger involves *learned ways of thinking and behaving*.

- We *learned* about when we should become angry and what we should do when we are angry
 - from others while we were growing up (seeing Dad shout, for example), and
 - from watching what happened when we expressed anger (people leaving us alone, for example).
- The things we learned about anger from observing and interacting with others can be helpful or unhelpful, and they shape the way we will respond in the future, often *without our awareness*.
- Just as we didn't choose to have a brain that causes us to feel angry when threatened, we also didn't choose much of what we learned about how to think and behave when anger comes up. *This is not our fault*.

- However, just as we learned our old ways of working with anger, we can now take responsibility for our anger and purposefully choose to learn new ways of working with it if we find that the old ways haven't worked so well for us – that's what this group is about!

Exercise – What did I learn about anger when I was growing up?

- When should I become angry? In what situations is anger appropriate?

- How do I behave when I am angry?

- How do I interact with others when I am angry?

- How do I feel after my anger is over?

- Our anger may be triggered by events that activate *implicit memories*. Implicit memories are patterns in our brains based in our previous experiences. These ‘memories’ play out without us feeling like we’re remembering, for example -
 - Our bodies remember how to ride a bicycle or shoot a free-throw
 - Emotions come up when we hear a particular song.
- With implicit memory, we often don’t recognize that part of what we are feeling in the present is an *echo* – a reactivation of patterns laid down in the past – and so we can have very strong emotional reactions that are out of proportion to the present situation, and then not understand why we got so angry. This is another way that our brains can be very tricky!

Summary: The Compassionate-Mind approach to understanding our anger:

- Anger is associated with both aggression (fight!) and withdrawal (flee!) strategies that worked for our ancestors in dealing with physical and social threats.
- However, our threat system, designed to prepare us to fight or flee, is poorly suited to many current situations, and using angry behaviors in these situations can cause problems for us.
- So there’s a mismatch – our brain and bodies are telling us, “fight!” and “run away!” - but we’re usually in situations where neither of those reactions will work in our best interests over the long term.

- *We did not choose* to have this difficult brain with this hyperactive threat system. We did not choose to feel anger. We also didn't choose much of what we learned (from our parents or others) about how to express anger. These things ***are not our fault.***
- A lot of the time, however, we may feel that it *is* our fault – that the fact that we get caught up in anger makes us a bad person. We may feel shame or get caught up in self-blame. *This shame doesn't help – but it can get in the way* of handling our anger well.
 - Consider: How has your anger (or things you did while angry) affected how you think about yourself?
- Alternatively, we may look for ways to justify our anger and anger-related behaviors, or ignore them altogether. This prevents them from working with them and taking responsibility for our lives. Compassion requires us to be honest with ourselves, and to own up to our responsibilities in the situation.
 - Consider: Have you found yourself ignoring the consequences of your anger, justifying them by seeing them as being caused by other people, or simply pushed these thoughts out of your mind?
- By understanding the way our minds work, we can learn to let go of this shame, stop blaming ourselves and others, and use what we know about our brains to work positively to handle our anger.

If You Didn't Get What You Needed

As we've discussed, anger is a defensive threat response that evolved to protect us, and which is likely to emerge in us when we feel threatened or unsafe. Really looking at our anger can be very difficult and painful, because one reason we may feel a lot of anger is that we grew up in environments in which we almost never felt safe – we may have been abused, traumatized, or not taken care of as we should have been. We may have learned to use anger because that was how our caretakers related to us, or as a way to push others away as an effort to feel safe when there was no other option available to us, and no one else there to protect us emotionally. We needed a way to protect ourselves, and we found one. We may feel a lot of shame around various aspects of our lives, and may use anger to cover it up.

If your experience is like this, this realization can be heartbreaking. If we can open ourselves to this heartbreak, we can see our anger as a cry for help, from that vulnerable part of us that desperately needs to feel safe. We're going to learn about how to help that part of us feel safe, to soothe our threat system, and to learn to replace our anger-driven coping with efforts that work better in helping us to protect ourselves, to have good relationships, and to have happy lives. This is hard work, and we want you to know that our hearts go out to you, and that we respect the courage you are showing in doing this, and the hard work it involves. You are worthy of this effort. You are worthy of compassion.

Homework Check-in and Homework for Session 5

- **How have the Mindful Breathing exercises been going for you?**
 - What have you noticed?
 - What has been hard for you?
 - What have you liked about it?

- **Learning to mindfully observe our anger:**
 - The mindfulness exercises have been designed to help us learn to observe our thoughts and emotions as they arise – so that we can notice them and be aware of them while we decide what actions we want to take, rather than being controlled by them.
 - With practice, we can learn to observe our threat response as it becomes active, without judging it or being caught up in it: “Oh, there goes my threat system. I’m really getting angry about this!”
 - One way to learn to apply this to anger is to get in the habit of observing our anger episodes. This will help us increase our awareness of our anger before it gets out of control and it will help us to understand the specific threats and situations that tend to push our buttons – because this is the same for everyone.
 - We’ll use the Anger Monitoring Form for this, so let’s talk about that.

Filling out the Anger Monitoring Form

Situation/Trigger: Briefly describe what happened, the situation that provoked anger or irritation. What threat was involved? Describe the context as well (“I was late, and the people in front of me were....”). Often, there are fairly consistent “triggers” that tend to activate our anger. It is important to identify what our specific triggers are – what sorts of experiences tend to make us feel threatened and angry, so that we can learn to work skillfully when faced with them.

My Response:

Emotions: What feelings did you have during the situation? Often when we feel anger, there are other emotions going on as well. Use specific terms (anger, irritation, rage, rejection, embarrassment, shame, fear, sadness, excitement; things like this).

Thoughts: What things did you tell yourself? (Examples: “I can’t let him treat me with such disrespect!”; “She was probably just in a hurry.”) How did my thoughts fit with my anger? Did they fuel it or calm it?

Behaviors: What did you do? What actions did you take?

What does my Compassionate Self say?: Consider your wise, compassionate mind that we connected with in the Compassionate Self exercise. How would your Compassionate Self approach this situation?

What would my Compassionate Self have done here if it were in control? How would your compassionate self behave in this situation?

Outcome: How did it turn out? What helped in this situation? What did I do that worked? What got in the way of me handling the situation in the best way I could?

Let’s fill one out together for practice. Try to remember a time you experienced anger over the past week (see next page):

Anger Monitoring Form

The purpose of this homework is to help you become familiar with the situations that tend to provoke your anger and the ways in which you tend to respond, and to learn to generate compassionate alternatives. Pick one time during the week that you experienced anger, rage, or irritation.

Situation/Trigger:

Emotions:

Thoughts:

Behaviors (What did I do?)

Outcome?

What does my Compassionate Self say?

What would my Compassionate Self have done?

Homework for Session 5

- **Every day, do either the Mindful Breathing exercise or the Compassionate Self exercise, for at least 5 minutes at a time. Make sure you do each exercise at least twice during the week (don't do the same one every day).**
- **Keep track of your exercises on the Compassion Practice Journal.**
- **Practice the Soothing Rhythm Breathing exercise at least twice per day, for at least 30 seconds at a time (hint: you can do this while standing in line, waiting for other activities to start, and in lots of other settings as well).**
- **Fill out the Anger Monitoring Form on the next page for one experience of anger, irritation, or frustration over the next week.**

Compassion Practice Journal

Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Anger Monitoring Form

The purpose of this homework is to help you become familiar with the situations that tend to provoke your anger and the ways in which you tend to respond. Pick one time during the week that you experienced anger, rage, or irritation.

Situation/Trigger:

Emotions:

Thoughts:

Behaviors (What did I do?)

Outcome?

What does my Compassionate Self say?

What would my Compassionate Self have done?

Session 6: Anger, Emotions, and Attention

In the past few weeks, we learned that emotions like anger and fear are threat responses that evolved to keep us safe. Today, we're going to talk more about these threat responses and the ways that they can affect us.

There are usually common themes to the sorts of situations in which we tend to experience anger and irritation:

- "I get angry when I feel disrespected."
- "I get angry when I have things planned out and they don't go as I like."
- When do you tend to get angry?

Often, situations that provoke anger in us can involve other emotions as well:

- Fear
- Nervousness
- Embarrassment
- Shame
- Vulnerability

Anger can sometimes be provoked by situations that remind us of the past, for example, of

- People who may have hurt us
- Times we may have failed or felt "not good enough."

We may have learned to feel anger in the place of fear, embarrassment, or shame. We may have learned as children that it was okay to feel and express some emotions (like anger), but that it was not okay to feel or show others, like fear, sadness, or vulnerability.

What other emotions might be present alongside (or underneath) my anger?

What emotions are okay for me to feel and express?

Are there any emotions that I do not feel okay about feeling and expressing?

Anger can also impact our attention and the way we think. Because they developed to protect us, threat responses like anger are very good at capturing our attention, so for example, when we're angry, we naturally -

- Tend to focus our attention on whatever has made us angry (someone who we felt spoke to us a bit rudely, for example).
- Tend to think thoughts that are both driven by our anger and tend to fuel it. ("He's doing that because he doesn't respect me!")

We have tricky brains! We have the ability to fuel our anger response by the ways we think about things that happen in our lives and the things we tend to notice when we are angry. In fact, our brains will tend to do this. This can produce what some people call “negative spirals,” where our bad mood feeds itself.

The nice thing is that we can work with our brains to create **positive spirals** (This is where compassion comes in!). Instead of fueling our threat response and keeping it going, we can help ourselves to feel safe, and develop emotions like compassion that can help us activate our soothing system and balance out our threat system.

Exercise: Exploring Our Different Emotions

In this exercise, we’ll begin working to recognize the different emotions that can lie behind our anger.

To start, take out a pen and a sheet of paper and draw lines on the paper to divide it into four squares, which we’ll label: ‘Angry Self’; ‘Anxious Self’; ‘Sad Self’; and ‘Compassionate Self’. Let’s start by writing ‘Angry Self’ in the top-left square:

- Consider a challenging situation that you’ve been dealing with, perhaps something that has recently caused you to be upset.
- How does your anger – your “angry self” view this situation? Spend a moment thinking about the typical thoughts you have when you’re angry – thoughts of unfairness, being dismissed, rejected, that ‘people don’t care’, that ‘people shouldn’t get away with this’, that ‘I have to show them.’ Write them down the sorts of thoughts you have when you are angry in this space.

- When you're ready, consider how your anger *feels*. Where is it in your body? Does it seem to move? How would you feel if that anger built up in you?
- Now think about the urges for action that come with your angry feelings. If your anger were totally in control, what would it have you do? Notice how the threat system tries to control your behaviour.
- Consider: What does your anger *really want*? Deep down, what would your anger like to have happen?

The idea is to get some insight into the core thoughts, feelings and desires for action that go with your anger system or 'angry self'.

Now, in the "Anxious Self" corner, repeat this exercise, this time considering any anxiety or worry you may feel about this situation. What does your anxious self think? Feel? What would it do? What does it want to happen? How does it want things to turn out?

In the "Sad Self" corner, explore if you have any sadness about the situation. What does your sad self think? Feel? What would it do? What does it want?

Now, let's move to the final section of the page and consider your compassionate self. Begin by breathing slightly more slowly and deeply; feel your body slowing down. As you do this, imagine yourself as a deeply compassionate being: kind, wise and confident. Create a friendly facial expression and imagine your kind, confident tone of voice. When you feel you are ready, take a moment to think about the situation that angered you, but focus on thoughts you have when you are being helpful and compassionate. Note how the sense of slowing associated with the compassionate self feels in your body. If that feeling (associated with a sense of confidence, wisdom and warmth) were to grow inside you, how would that feel in your body? If your compassionate self were totally in control,

what would it want you to do? Consider for a moment, deep down, what does your compassionate self really want?

Exercise 8.2: Exploring Different Aspects of the Emotional Self

_____ Self

Thoughts and Imagery: What thoughts are you having as you feel this emotion? What were you imagining?

Bodily Experiences: How do you experience this emotion in your body? For example, does it hurt? Is there an experience of tightness, tension, sinking, or temperature? How does it feel?

Motivation: What does this 'emotional self' want to do? What behavior is it trying to motivate you to do?

Homework for Session 6

- **Every day, do either the Mindful Breathing exercise, or the Compassionate Self exercise, or**
- **Keep track of these practices on the Compassion Practice Journal.**
- **Practice the Soothing Rhythm Breathing exercise at least twice per day, for at least 30 seconds at a time (hint: you can do this while standing in line, waiting for other activities to start, and in lots of other settings as well).**
- **Fill out the Anger Monitoring Form on the next page for one experience of anger, irritation, or frustration over the next week.**

Compassion Practice Journal

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Anger Monitoring Form

The purpose of this homework is to help you become familiar with the situations that tend to provoke your anger and the ways in which you tend to respond, and to generate compassionate alternatives. Pick one time during the week that you experienced anger, rage, or irritation.

Situation/Trigger:

Emotions:

Thoughts:

Behaviors (What did I do?)

Outcome?

What does my Compassionate Self say?

What would my Compassionate Self have done?

Session 7: Learning to Change Difficult Patterns

Difficult Habits and the Brain

- For many of us, angry habits are very set. We've had these feelings, thoughts and behaviors for as long as we can remember.
- They can even seem to happen automatically, with a sense of being out of control – like we are locked on a track that we can't get off of.
- **There is a reason for this!**
 - Every time we act, think, feel, perceive, or interact with others, groups of cells in our brains are activated together in patterns.
 - The patterns that go with these ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving can become **worn in**, in the brain – kind of like when we walk the same path over and over, it wears in.
 - **The bad news** is that once worn in, these patterns are very easy to activate – almost automatic. (Once a path in the woods is worn in, it is easier to walk there than any place else. When it rains, where does the water run? Down the path.)
 - **The good news** is that if we learn to activate different patterns instead, practicing *new* ways of responding, we will strengthen these new patterns, and the old ones will gradually weaken. (If we stop walking on the old path and walk a new way, we will slowly wear in a new path, and the old one will gradually grow over).
 - Just like the path example, this doesn't happen immediately – but we can be confident that if we continue to practice new strategies, the new path *will* wear in, the old one *will* slowly erode...and eventually we'll have a habit that we *chose*.

- Compassion-focused therapy isn't just about reducing and changing anger and angry behavior, it's about creating *new mental patterns*, and *wearing them in* – strengthening them over time. **This is how we change.** We want to build kindness, confidence, and a feeling of safety.

Exercise: The Person I Want To Be

What kind of person would you like to be? Imagine that you have died, and the people that love you most are at your funeral. Imagine they are giving your eulogy, and are saying, "He was so _____."

Come up with 3 words to finish that sentence.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Later, write a more detailed description of the sort of person you'd like to be _____

It may be strange to think of this, particularly if you think of yourself as an “angry person.” But anger doesn’t define you:

- Anger is something you experience, not who you are.
- Consider water. Water is pure and clear. Even if there is dirt or oil in the water, the water is not the dirt, and it is not the oil. When these settle or are removed, the water is again pure and clear. We can think of our minds as clear water, and anger as dirt or oil that is in it.
- In a sense, learning to work with anger is like learning to “clear the water,” to keep our anger and threat system from controlling how we think, feel, and behave, so that we can become *the people we want to be*, so that our ways of thinking and behaving reflect our true values.
- One way we “clear the water” is by learning to recognize when our threat-based anger is active, and instead of acting on it, learning to activate our safeness system instead, for example, by using compassion.
- This will help balance our emotions and allow us to have our behaviors reflect what we choose, rather than being dictated by our anger.

So let's talk some more about compassion and how to use it to activate our soothing system and develop patterns that will help us deal with our anger.

The Compassionate Mind model talks about 6 characteristics of compassion. We can work with these to create compassionate patterns in our brains:

1. Motivation – we cultivate a desire to relate to ourselves and others in a kinder, more helpful way that will help to alleviate suffering.
 - “I’ve suffered enough as a result of my anger. It’s time to do something about it. This is not the sort of person I want to be.”
 - “I may not be able to cure her anger, but at least I won’t contribute to it on purpose. I want to make things better for her, not worse.”
2. Sensitivity – we learn to notice difficult emotions and thoughts as they arise, just as they are, in ourselves and others.
 - “Look, I’m really getting irritated right now.”
 - “Look, his buttons are really getting pushed. I know what *that* feels like.”
3. Sympathy – we allow ourselves to be emotionally touched and moved by the suffering of ourselves and other people. Rather than deny our difficulties, we allow ourselves to connect with how difficult this really is.
 - “When I’m angry, I may look like the bad guy, but it isn’t fun for me either. In fact, it hurts a great deal.”
 - “When others are angry or hostile, it isn’t fun for them either. They hurt just like I do.”

4. Distress Tolerance – in order to work with difficult emotions, we have to learn to tolerate them. We learn to become familiar with our feelings and to accept and experience them, rather than denying them. Changing angry habits means accepting and enduring the discomfort that occurs when we refrain from what we usually do. It's like having poison ivy – feeling the discomfort of an itch but deciding not to scratch it, because we know the scratching *makes it worse*. This is difficult, but we *can* do it.

- “This is really uncomfortable, and I really want to lash out (or escape). Let's see if I can do something different. I've endured difficult things in my life, and I can endure this feeling.”
- “It's hard being around someone who is having a hard time of it, but I don't have to let *their* distress cause anger in *me*. We all struggle sometimes. I wonder if there's something I can do to calm the situation.”

5. Empathy – is learning to recognize and understand emotional experiences and how it makes sense that we or others may be feeling this way. We often think of empathy in relation to others – understanding how they are feeling, but it helps to understand our own feelings, too! We examine our own feelings with an accepting curiosity so that we can truly understand and work with them. Many of us never learned to recognize, name, and talk about our emotions.

- “I'm aware that I'm feeling anger and frustration right now, as well as some embarrassment. I'm feeling like they think that I don't matter, or they wouldn't act like that toward me, so I also feel unimportant.”

- “She’s really upset right now. I wonder if I can understand how it makes sense that she might feel this way?”

6. Non-condemning and Non-judging – we learn to refrain from labeling our thoughts and feelings as good or bad, right or wrong. We can observe our experiences (and those of others) without judging them. We can be aware that our unwanted emotions are often part of our evolved threat response and are not our fault...and this applies to everyone else, too!

- “It makes sense that I would feel this way, but I am also aware that this feeling is a mental event – an experience in my brain, and is neither good nor bad. It feels intense right now, but it will pass eventually.”
- “It makes sense that he feels like this right now, and is acting this way. We all have these difficult threat systems. I want to make sure that I’m not doing things that make him feel threatened.”

A Reminder: Developing Compassion in a World that can be Cruel

As we discussed a few weeks ago, some people are afraid to develop compassion:

- They may fear it will make them weak.
- They may fear that others will take advantage of them.
- They may fear that if they open themselves to difficult emotions, that they will be overwhelmed.

These ideas are based on a lack of understanding of compassion:

- Compassion requires both strength and courage – directed toward helping ourselves and other people.
- Compassion involves assertiveness and standing up for ourselves and for others, not allowing ourselves to be taken advantage of.
- Compassion gives us a way to work with our difficult emotions that can help to heal them. It allows us to work with our difficulties as they come up, so that they don't build up (and blow up, in the case of anger).
- Difficult emotions are not fun to work with, but we can do it, and compassion gives us a way.

Exercise: Compassionate Recognition of Anger as Suffering.

The root of compassion is the recognition that *all of us just want to be happy and to avoid suffering*, even as we all just find ourselves here, with these tricky brains and difficult emotions that we didn't choose or design.

The purpose of this exercise is to deepen our understanding of anger as a threat response – ultimately, as a source of suffering, not power – and to cultivate compassion for ourselves and others who are in the grip of anger.

- Take a quiet moment, and consider what it is like when you are caught up in anger.
- Think about how you feel in that moment:
 - Are you happy? Are you comfortable?
 - Do you feel safe?
 - Do you feel connected with others?
 - Do your thoughts and behavior reflect the sort of person you want to be?
 - Consider the consequences of your anger, and how they have impacted your life.
- Consider that this unpleasant experience, anger, is a type of suffering that affects not only you, but those you interact with.
- Try to experience some compassion around this – “How difficult it is that I have to experience the suffering of anger.” Sit with this awareness for a bit.

- Try to cultivate a motivation to free yourself of this suffering – “How much better it would be if I could free myself from this anger. I will commit myself to doing so.” Consider this – see if you can really *feel* it.
- Consider others who are hostile, acting out of anger – “How much they must be suffering to act in this way...” Anger feels as bad for them as it does for us.
- *Imagine* having the motivation for them to be free of their suffering – “I wish that they could be happy, and free of their anger.” (it’s okay if you don’t *feel* this motivation yet – just imagine what it would be like *if you did*).

Homework for Session 7

- **Every day, do The Mindful Breathing exercise, OR The Compassionate Self exercise, OR The Compassionate Recognition of Anger as Suffering exercise,**

for at least 5 minutes at a time. Make sure you do all 3 different exercises during the week (don’t do the same one every day). By now, you might want to stretch the exercises – to try doing them for 10-15 minutes, or to do more than one per day...but move at a pace that is comfortable for you.
- **Keep track of these practices in the Compassion Practice Journal.**
- **Practice the Soothing Rhythm Breathing exercise at least twice per day, for at least 30 seconds at a time (hint: you can do this while standing in line, waiting for other activities to start, and in lots of other settings as well).**
- **Fill out the Anger Monitoring Form on the next page for one experience of anger, irritation, or frustration over the next week.**

Compassion Practice Journal

Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Anger Monitoring Form

The purpose of this homework is to help you become familiar with the situations that tend to provoke your anger and the ways in which you tend to respond, and to generate compassionate alternatives. Pick one time during the week that you experienced anger, rage, or irritation.

Situation/Trigger:

Emotions:

Thoughts:

Behaviors (What did I do?)

Outcome?

What does my Compassionate Self say?

What would my Compassionate Self have done?

Session 8: Working with Angry Habits - the RAGE Model

Now it's time to really get to work in addressing our anger head-on, using our compassionate skills to work with angry habits. As we've mentioned, angry behaviors are driven by a strong threat system and involve well-learned patterns in the brain, so changing them takes some work and patience.

A general framework for changing angry patterns and developing new ones can be described using the acronym **RAGE**:

R

- **Recognize** the situation that provokes the anger, and the signs of anger coming up in us.
- **Reduce** our arousal by using soothing exercises.
- **Refrain** from engaging in the habitual anger behavior.

A

- **Acknowledge** that our threat system is **activated** right now.
- **Accept** and **Endure** (Okay, so that's an "E" ... 😊) the discomfort associated with this activation, and with refraining from the habitual behavior.
- **Access** the kind, wise, and confident perspective of your compassionate mind.

G

- **Generate** compassionate alternative responses. This can involve a number of different ways of thinking and behaving, depending on the situation.

- **Give** yourself permission to experience whatever you are experiencing, to feel without judging it. We can observe our threat system without acting on it. Learning to respond with compassion comes with practice.

E

- **Enact** compassionate alternatives. From the perspective of your compassionate self, decide on the response you will have to the situation and put it into action.
- **Establish** new patterns in your brain. Every time you choose a compassionate alternative instead of a habitual anger behavior, you are helping to establish new patterns in your brain that will shape how you respond in the future.
- **Experience** yourself as a compassionate person. As you observe yourself acting out of your compassionate mind rather than your threatened mind, you can begin to relate to yourself in a new way: as a compassionate person.

There are a limitless number of responses we can replace our old angry patterns with – the key is that whatever we do is guided by a kind, compassionate intent to help ourselves and other people when our threat systems have been activated.

How we do this is based in developing new, compassionate mental patterns:

Our threat system and anger can focus our minds in various ways:

- our attention (what we notice and pay attention to)
- our thoughts (what we think about; what we tell ourselves)
- our behavior (what activities we do; how we treat others)
- our feelings (our emotions and motivations)

Rather than allowing all of these things to be controlled by our automatic threat response, we can learn to work with these areas, to develop

- Compassionate Attention – noticing our experiences and learning to choose where to focus our attention (on helpful things), rather than having it controlled for us by our threat system.
- Compassionate Thinking – thinking about situations in helpful ways that bring balance, rather than fueling our anger and sense of threat.
- Compassionate Behavior – acting in effective ways that address problems directly but do not harm ourselves and other people the way angry behavior does; Acting in ways that promote happiness in us and others.
- Compassionate Emotion – developing feelings of compassion – to experience sympathy for ourselves and others when we are suffering, and developing the desire to free ourselves and others from this suffering.

These can take many forms, but always have one thing in common:

They are motivated by a kind desire to help ourselves and others, by the recognition that we all just want to be happy and to not suffer.

In today's group, we will focus on the **R's – Recognizing, Reducing our arousal, and Refraining** using Compassionate Behavior and Compassionate Attention.

By now, we've done some exercises that have helped us be more aware of triggers – situations that activate our threat system and provoke our anger or irritation. Our mindfulness exercises also have hopefully helped us learn to notice when thoughts and feelings emerge in our minds. This is the recognizing piece – being aware that “this is the moment of truth,” an opportunity to change our anger patterns.

We can use **Compassionate Thinking and Behavior** to plan ahead for these situations. The first step is to increase the likelihood that we'll **recognize** what's happening before our threat response is going full throttle, so that we can act effectively.

Based on our observations so far in the group, let's make a list of situations in which we are vulnerable to become angry – which tend to activate us. For example, “when I am in a hurry and people in front of me are moving slowly.”

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Once we've recognized that the cycle of our anger is beginning, we can use **Compassionate Attention** exercises for working with our difficult emotions in these situations, when we have observed ourselves becoming angry or irritated.

1. First, we can use it to **reduce the arousal** in our bodies that fuels our anger.

- We can do this by focusing our attention in a way that relaxes us, for example, on **Soothing Rhythm Breathing**.

Let's do this now:

- Think of a situation that brings up anger or irritation for you. Outside of group, we'll use the situations that arise in our lives.

- Notice the sensations that arise in your body as you focus on this situation.
 - Now bring your attention to your breath, and do the **Soothing Rhythm Breathing** exercise. Breathe in through your mouth, and out through your nose, in a rhythm that feels soothing to you. The key is to focus on slowing the body and mind down – perhaps counting to 3 on the in-breath, holding for 3, and counting to 3 on the out-breath.
 - Every so often, allow your attention to return to your emotions, thoughts, and your bodily experience. Notice them, acknowledge them as “This is how I’m feeling right now,” and bring your attention back to the soothing rhythm breathing.
 - We can also use our other soothing exercises, like the safe place exercise, or the compassionate-self exercise. Remember, the idea is to balance our emotions – to **move out of the red and into the green** – so use the ones that work best at soothing you and helping you to feel safe.
2. The last **R** is **refraining** from the habitual angry behavior. This is important, because every time we refrain from doing that behavior and do something else instead, we slowly weaken the mental patterns associated with the anger and strengthen other, more helpful patterns.
- **Refraining** is difficult, because our brains are used to responding in certain habitual ways – it’s almost automatic (and not our fault!).
 - Because of this, there is **discomfort** associated with refraining, and one of the things we need to be able to do is to **accept** and **endure** this discomfort.

- We'll talk about working with this directly next session, but one way to do this is through using our compassionate attention to distract ourselves temporarily. We can do this by imagining a soothing place (see exercise below), by doing a compassionate-self exercise, or by thinking of other things that we find calming.
 - We're not using these strategies to escape the difficulty, but to balance our emotions so that we can come back and work with it skillfully, when we're not controlled by our threat systems.

Exercise: Creating a Soothing Space

In this imagery-based exercise we are to try to create a place in our mind – a place that gives you the feeling of safeness and calmness. When we are angry, depressed, or distressed, those can be difficult feelings to generate, but the act of trying, and the sense of it being the sort of place you would like to be, is the important thing. So remember, it is the act of trying the practice that is important – the feelings may follow later.

Try to imagine a place where you feel completely comfortable, safe, and at ease. Your place may be a beautiful wood where the leaves of the trees dance gently in the breeze. Powerful shafts of light caress the ground with brightness. Imagine a wind gently on your face and a sense of the light dancing in front of you. Hear the rustle of the leaves on the trees; imagine a smell of woodiness or a sweetness of the air. Your place may be a beautiful beach with a crystal blue sea stretching out to the horizon where it meets the ice blue sky. Under foot is soft, white, fine sand that is silky to the touch. You can hear the gentle hushing of the waves on the sand. Imagine the sun on your face, sense the light dancing in diamond spectacles on the water,

imagine the soft sand under your feet as your toes dig into it, and feel a light breeze gently touching your face. Your safe place may be a log fire where you can hear the crackle of the logs burning and the smell of wood smoke. These are examples or possible places, but the focus is on developing a feeling of safeness for you – these are only suggestions and your safe place might be different. Focus on the feelings of safety, comfort, and being valued, just as you are.

It helps our attention if we practice focusing on each of our senses – what we can imagine seeing, hearing, and feeling. When you bring your safe place to mind, allow your body to relax. Think about your facial expression; allow it to have a soft smile of pleasure at being here.

It is also useful to imagine, that as this is your own unique safe place, *the place itself (and any other people or beings that may be there – which is up to you) takes joy in you being here.* Allow yourself to *feel* how your safe place values you, and takes pleasure in your presence. Explore your feelings when you imagine that this place is happy that you are there.

Homework for Session 8

- **Every day, do The Mindful Breathing exercise, OR The Compassionate Self exercise, OR The Soothing Space exercise for at least 5 minutes at a time. Make sure you do at least 2 different exercises during the week (don't do the same one every day). By now, you might want to stretch the exercises – to try doing them for 10-15 minutes...but move at a pace that is comfortable for you.**
- **Keep track of these practices in the Compassion Practice Journal, and fill out the Anger Monitoring form once during the week.**
- **Practice the Soothing Rhythm Breathing exercise at least twice per day, for at least 30 seconds at a time.**

Compassion Practice Journal

Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
Monday		
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Thursday		
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Anger Monitoring Form

The purpose of this homework is to help you become familiar with the situations that tend to provoke your anger and the ways in which you tend to respond, and to generate compassionate alternatives. Pick one time during the week that you experienced anger, rage, or irritation.

Situation/Trigger:

Emotions:

Thoughts:

Behaviors (What did I do?)

Outcome?

What does my Compassionate Self say?

What would my Compassionate Self have done?

Session 9: Accepting and Enduring

Last week, we learned about the RAGE model, and spent time talking about the R's: Recognizing, Reducing arousal, and Refraining from anger-driven behavior. Today we'll spend some time with the A's:

- **Acknowledging** that our threat system is **activated**.
 - **Accepting** and **enduring** the discomfort associated with this activation and with refraining from our habitual response.
 - **Accessing** the wise, confident, and wise qualities of your compassionate self.
1. **Acknowledging** – once we have recognized that our threat system is kicking in – we are beginning to get angry, it is important to use compassionate thinking to relate to it in a helpful way. There are specific thoughts that can help – that we can use to compassionately “coach” ourselves through the situation.
- Noting the activation without judging it.
 - “Oh, look. There goes my threat system!”
 - Reminding ourselves of what we know about anger.
 - “It makes sense that I feel this way. I have a very sensitive, active threat system, and this is just the sort of situation that sets it off. This is not my fault, but I want to make sure that this feeling doesn't lead me to act in ways I'll regret.”
 - Acknowledging that this is uncomfortable, but that the discomfort is temporary, and that we can endure and work with it.

- “I hate feeling this way, but I know that this feeling will pass after a while. I won’t always feel this way, and there are things I can do to keep from fueling this threat response and to soothe myself instead. No emotion is permanent.”

2. Accepting

Accepting the discomfort of the Threat Emotions

- Our anger and discomfort are often fueled by thoughts that we “shouldn’t have” to experience it, that the fact that we are uncomfortable is somehow unfair or means that there is something wrong with us.
- By now, we understand how our threat system works, so we know that these emotions are just a part of life – very unpleasant, but not really “unfair” (although we all feel this way sometimes), and certainly not a sign that something is wrong with us (in fact, they are signs that our system is working to protect us).
- So our goal is to accept and remember that this is a part of life, and to work with the experience the best we can.

Accepting the discomfort of refraining:

- In addition to the discomfort of the anger itself, there is also discomfort that goes along with refraining from our habitual anger-driven responses.
- Keep in mind that these habits are well-worn patterns in our brains – our brains are trained to respond in this way – they’re used to it, and it almost feels like they *want* to respond in the old, habitual ways – it’s the brain’s “path of least resistance.”

- So refraining from these habits can produce discomfort – almost like not scratching an itch, or refraining from smoking.
- This discomfort is actually a signal that we’re addressing the real habit – we can see it as a sign that “this is the moment of truth,” the time when we can make real change by refraining from following the old pattern and creating a new one.
- We can observe and accept this discomfort as a natural part of changing our patterns, and know that it will ease as the balance shifts away from the old pattern and toward the new one.
- We can remind ourselves of the reasons we’re doing this. We’re choosing to experience this discomfort for a *good reason*. Working out our bodies involves discomfort – but we tolerate it to be strong and healthy. Not scratching poison ivy involves discomfort – but we *tolerate it* because we know *the scratching makes it worse*. We can remind ourselves of the reasons we want to change our angry responses, and of the people we want to be.

3. **Enduring** the discomfort of change.

- We’ve already learned a number of tools that can help us endure these forms of discomfort:
 - Soothing Rhythm Breathing
 - Focus your attention on your breath, and settle into a rhythm that feels soothing. Bring your attention to the rise and fall of your abdomen.

- The Soothing Space Exercise
 - Bring to mind that place in which you feel totally safe, happy, and comfortable. Allow yourself to recognize that this anger you are feeling is temporary, and that you always have this safe place you can bring forth when you need to.
- The Compassionate Self Exercise
 - Generate your wise, compassionate, confident self. How would your compassionate self cope with this discomfort? What advice would you give to someone else who was experiencing it? (we'll focus on this more below)

3. **Accessing** the kind, wise, and confident qualities of your compassionate self.

- When you notice yourself beginning to get hijacked by your angry threat response, it's a perfect time to shift into the perspective of your compassionate self.
- Begin by doing 30 seconds of soothing rhythm breathing, and connect with the qualities of your compassionate self – a kind motivation to help yourself and others, the wisdom to draw upon your understanding and life experience as you approach the situation, and the confidence that you can work with this situation, whatever it is.
- The exercises below shows how we can use compassionate thinking to work with the sorts of thoughts that fuel our anger:

Mentalizing

Mentalizing involves looking at the mental causes for how we feel and behave – the thoughts, interpretations, and motivations behind our anger. Shifting our of the certainty of our anger and into the kind, curious perspective of the compassionate self helps us to slow down and really look at the thoughts and feelings behind our anger. Instead of shaming and blaming ourselves or other people for our reactions, the compassionate self can ask questions that direct our attention to our internal experience:

- “How am I interpreting this situation? What do I think it means about me? What does it imply for my future? What does it imply that others are thinking about me?”
- “How does it make sense that I would feel threatened by this situation?”
- “What feelings are coming up in me right now?”
- “Are there other feelings I am not acknowledging here?”
- “What is my greatest fear if I do not act on my anger? What’s my greatest fear if I *do*?”
- “What are the motives and desires in me that are being served by my anger?”
- “What do I need to feel safe? What would help me feel less threatened?”
- What are the thoughts, motivations, and fears behind your anger? See if you can begin to figure out what mental activities tend to fuel this feeling for you.

What would my compassionate self say? Angry Thinking and Compassionate Thinking

- To shift our minds from angry, threat-driven thinking to compassionate thinking, we can learn to identify the specific thoughts that tend to drive our anger, and to consider and generate compassionate alternatives. Let's compare and contrast angry thinking and compassionate thinking.

Angry Thinking	Compassionate Thinking
Narrowly focused on the threat or object of our anger	Broad, considers many factors in understanding the situation
Inflexible and ruminative	Flexible, problem-solves
Activates our threat system; fuels anger	Activates our safeness system; helps us to feel comfortable and at peace
Directs hostility towards others and ourselves	Directs kindness towards others and ourselves
Judgemental and critical	Non-critical and empathic
Focused on dominating or punishing	Focused on helping ourselves and others, finding solutions that benefit everyone and harm no one

To help you think about compassionate alternatives to angry thinking, we can consider the event that triggered your anger and, again, ask ourselves:

- How might I see this situation if I were not stressed or angry?
- If there were a neutral, caring person around, how might they see this event and help me/us think it through?
- How would I actually prefer to look at this if I were calm and collected?
- How will I see this in three months? Will I even remember it?
- From the perspective of my compassionate self, what might I say to a friend who had experienced this? How would I help them to feel supported?

Below, consider a situation that has angered you, reflect on the thoughts that are fuelling your anger about the situation, and come up with some compassionate alternative thoughts.

Angry Thoughts	Compassionate Alternatives

Homework for Session 9

- **Every day, do**
 - **The Mindful Breathing exercise, OR Compassionate Self exercise, OR The Soothing Space exercise, OR the Compassionate Thinking exercise (above)**

for at least 10 minutes at a time. Make sure you do at least 3 different exercises during the week (don't just do the same one every day). You can do more than one exercise per day, if you like (this is encouraged – practice is good!)

- **Keep track of these practices in the Compassion Practice Journal, and fill out the Anger Monitoring Form once during the next week.**
- **Practice the Soothing Rhythm Breathing exercise at least twice per day, for at least 30 seconds at a time**

Compassion Practice Journal

Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
Monday		
Tuesday		
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Thursday		
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Saturday		
Sunday		

Anger Monitoring Form

The purpose of this homework is to help you become familiar with the situations that tend to provoke your anger and the ways in which you tend to respond, and to generate compassionate alternatives. Pick one time during the week that you experienced anger, rage, or irritation.

Situation/Trigger:

Emotions:

Thoughts:

Behaviors (What did I do?)

Outcome?

What does my Compassionate Self say?

What would my Compassionate Self have done?

Session 10: Compassionate Working with Difficult Situations

Now we've come to the "G" in the RAGE model. Now that we've recognized that we are becoming angry, and have acknowledged and accepted the anger as our threat system trying to protect us, it's time to **generate compassionate responses.**

The way we use compassionate behavior to deal with situations that trigger our anger can take many forms, depending upon the situation. Sometimes in life, there are things we can do to effectively work with and change the situation that is provoking our anger. At other times, we are faced with situations that we don't like, but can do little or nothing to change. This session, we'll focus on ways to work with situations that we can have some effect on, and things we can do to work with them.

Compassionate Thinking and Emotion: Compassion for All in the Situation

- Consider that you and everyone in this situation ultimately just wants to be happy and to avoid suffering, even though we can pursue this in very frustrating ways.
- Consider that you and everyone else in this situation have very tricky brains, with their very sensitive threat systems, and the problems that come with it. Consider that this is *not your fault (and not theirs, either!)*.
- If there is someone in the situation who is irritating or frustrating you, see if you can cultivate empathy for them:
 - Have you ever behaved like they are behaving? How were you feeling at the time? How does their behavior make sense?

- Just like you may be having lots of automatic reactions to the situation based on how your brain works and your previous experience, they likely are, too:
 - If they are being hostile and acting in anger, remember that this is a form of suffering, and that it isn't fun for them, either.
 - If their threat system is activated, be aware that their attention is likely narrowed, and they are likely to be thinking less flexibly (just like you do when you are angry).

Compassionate Thinking and Behavior: Problem Solving

1. Consider the problem and generate potential solutions.

- What are all the possible responses you could have to the situation?
- Use your Compassionate Mind in generating solutions. What does your compassionate self see as a good solution?
- Generate as many ideas as you can! They don't have to be realistic.
- Solutions can involve both action (working with the situation) and acceptance (working with your response to the situation).

2. Consider the consequences of the various solutions.

- From the perspective of your Compassionate Self, consider the solutions and their likely short-term and long-term consequences.
- If the situation involves other people (as most anger-producing situations do), there are various factors that can be considered in choosing the best response:
 - The **objective** – what outcome do I want from this situation?

- The **relationship** with the other people involved – how will these responses impact my relationship with this person?
- The **expression** of how you feel – letting others know how I’m feeling about this situation.
- These priorities can compete with one another. For example, if someone is doing something that irritates me, I might be able to get them to stop very quickly (the **objective**) by yelling at them or threatening them. However, this is likely to be damaging to our **relationship** (because they have a threat system, too!).
- Often, we may damage important relationships in the service of objectives that may or may not be that important, or by expressing emotions in hostile ways.
 - We can *choose* to accept certain situations in order to maintain good relationships. This is making an active choice – not passively “just taking it.”
 - Alternatively, some objectives are worth prioritizing over relationships (for example, when someone is harming or abusing us or another person).
 - We can work with our emotions in ways that don’t harm our relationships (for example, with the exercises you’ve learned), and express them in assertive ways (we’ll talk about this soon).
- Consider that others are likely to behave more reasonably if their emotions are more balanced – so do we want to interact with them in a way that causes them to feel more threatened, or do we want to interact with them in a way that causes them to feel more

comfortable and safe? Which is more likely to lead to a favorable result for us and for them?

Now we get to the “E” in the RAGE Model, as we prepare to **enact** our compassionate responses:

3. Using your Compassionate Mind, choose the best Potential Solution.

- Bringing to mind your compassionate self, select a solution that will work the best for you and others.
- Choose an option that you have the skills to carry out. One option can be asking for help from someone else who may be able to assist you.

4. Implement and Evaluate the Solution.

- How did the situation turn out?
- What worked or seemed to be helpful?
- What didn’t work as well?

As we do this, it’s important to remember the other E’s in the model:

- When we are choosing a compassionate alternative and acting on it, we begin the process of **establishing new, compassionate brain patterns**. We’re “walking a different path” now, and if we keep it up over time, our old, threat-based patterns will weaken, and our new compassionate responses will be strengthened and will happen more and more easily and automatically.
- In doing this, we can change how we **experience ourselves**. Rather than seeing ourselves as an “angry person” or a “timid person,” we can begin to identify more and more with our compassionate selves, and can

enact our values – the sort of person we want to be – in our lives more and more.

If we are going to help ourselves and others change, we can do so in compassionate, helpful ways, rather than in shameful, attacking ways that cause us to become trapped in shame (but don't really help us do better).

Shameful Self-Attacking

- Desire to punish and condemn
- Backward looking
- Linked to disappointment and focusing on deficits
- Emotions of anger, frustration, anxiety, and contempt
- Consider a critical teacher with a child who is struggling

Compassionate Self-Correction

- Desire to improve - to be at one's best
- Forward looking
- Linked to building on the positives and abilities
- Validation of set-backs and encouragement
- Consider a compassionate teacher with a child who is struggling

Exercise: Problem Solving

Bring to mind a difficult situation in which you tend to get angry. Think about the various aspects of the situation. It can help to use a “When (this happens) , then (that happens)” format.

Situation: _____

From the perspective of your Compassionate Self, think of possible responses and their consequences (consider objectives, relationships, and expression, in the short-term and long-term)

1. _____

Consequences:

- Objectives - _____
- Relationships - _____
- Expression - _____

2. _____

Consequences:

- Objectives - _____
- Relationships - _____
- Expression - _____

3. _____

Consequences:

- Objectives - _____
- Relationships - _____
- Expression - _____

4.

Consequences:

Objectives -

Relationship

Expression -

Homework for Session 10

- **Once during the next week, do the Problem-Solving Exercise around a situation that causes you irritation, frustration, or anger.**
- **Every day, do**
 - **The Compassionate Self exercise, OR**
 - **The Safe Place exercise, OR**
 - **The Mindful Breathing exercise, OR**
 - **The Compassionate Thinking exercise.**

for at least 10 minutes at a time. Make sure you do at least 3 different exercises during the week (don't just do the same one every day). You can do more than one exercise per day, if you like (this is encouraged – practice is good!)
- **Keep track of these practices in the Compassion Practice Journal, and fill out the Anger Monitoring Form at least once over the next week.**
- **Practice the Soothing Rhythm Breathing exercise at least twice per day, for at least 30 seconds at a time**

Compassion Practice Journal

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Anger Monitoring Form

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Situation/Trigger:

Emotions:

Thoughts:

Behaviors (What did I do?)

Outcome?

What does my Compassionate Self say?

What would my Compassionate Self have done?

Session 11: Compassionate Behavior - Assertiveness Skills

Over the course of this group, we've identified situations that trigger our anger - that we know are difficult for us. This can be helpful, because if we can anticipate these situations, we can prepare for them.

- It is hard to do our best problem-solving when our buttons have been pushed – once our threat systems are activated, our attention narrows and we think less flexibly.
- Planning ahead for such situations can help us cool down our threat system by giving us a sense of confidence, control, and skills that we can use to deal with the situation (without making it worse!).
- Last week we talked about problem solving. Today we'll talk about a few other compassionate responses that we can generate and enact in our lives.

Assertiveness Skills

Often, when others are pushing our buttons, we may respond in one of two ways:

- Aggression – this is the classic “anger” response - we become verbally or physically hostile. We may use sarcasm, be insulting, belittle the other person's perspective, or behave threateningly.
- Passiveness – when we are passive, such as when we “just stuff it,” and say nothing, we just take it (for example, allowing others to take advantage), even while we may be seething with anger or resentment under the surface.

Both of these ways of responding are threat-based, and are likely to cause us problems – in all three areas discussed last week.

- They often lead to the situation turning out poorly for us and/or others (**objective**).
- They often damage the **relationship** between us and the other person.
- They do not allow us to **express our emotions** in a way that can be received and understood by the other people involved.

Assertiveness involves standing up for ourselves in a way that respects ourselves, the other person, and which expresses our emotions directly. The goal of assertiveness is not necessarily just to get what we want, but to communicate clearly and express ourselves in appropriate ways.

Remember the 3-Circles Model, and that we *all* have very sensitive threat systems – assertiveness is about expressing ourselves in difficult situations while minimizing the extent to which we cause ourselves *and* others to feel threatened, so that we are not “pouring gasoline on the fire.” When we all feel safe, we are more likely to treat one another with respect, to problem-solve well, and to come to successful solutions.

Compassionate Behavior: Assertive Communication Skills

1. Expressing Emotions and Desires: “When _____, I feel _____, and I would like _____.”

- Briefly and directly describe the situation, how you feel, and what you’d like to see happen.
- “When you call me that name, I don’t like it, and I would like you to stop.”
- “When you let us out of class late, I feel rushed and anxious about getting where I need to be, and I’d like to keep to the schedule in the future.”

2. “I” statements

- State your emotions or desires directly, without unnecessary embellishments that could be insulting to others.
- “I’ve never really liked baseball. I like football.” (assertive)
- “Baseball sucks. Real men play football.” (aggressive)

3. Disagreeing

- We can disagree in ways that express our position as well as expressing respect for others...it is okay to disagree, and we can express disagreement directly and appropriately.
- We can state that we disagree, state our perspective, and even ask clarifying questions to make sure that we understand the other person’s perspective.

- Example:
 - Statement - “Jim is a jerk.”
 - Disagreement – “I disagree. He’s always been good to me, and I’ve seen him be nice to others as well. Did you have a bad experience with him?”

4. Apologizing

- All of us sometimes do things, purposefully or not, that are hurtful to others.
- When we become aware that we have hurt others, it may bother us (this is *good* – a sign of our compassion, actually), and so we tend to respond in ways that may not be helpful:
 - We may justify or rationalize our response: “He deserved it because.....”
 - We may use it as a reason to feel bad about ourselves: “I’m a terrible person!”
 - We may push it out of our minds: avoid thinking about it, and may even forget about it.
- None of these responses help to mend the harm that was caused by our behavior, and they may even make it worse.
- While apologizing does not erase the harm we’ve done, acknowledging our fault and committing to do better (and meaning it!) can make movement toward healing it.

- Apologizing involves directly acknowledging the harm we've done, expressing regret (without elaborating in ways that "let us off the hook"), and expressing an intention not to repeat it.
- Examples:
 - "I'm very sorry that I called you names. I was angry about this situation, but that is no excuse. I'm working on handling my anger better, and I'm going to treat you better in the future."
 - "I'm sorry I used the last of the _____. It didn't occur to me that it would inconvenience you, and I'll try to be more thoughtful in the future."
- Remember that there is a difference between guilt/regret ("I wish I hadn't done that. I'm going to do better in the future."), and shame ("the fact that I did that means I'm a bad person.").
 - Guilt and regret can be helpful, to the extent that they lead us to take responsibility for our actions and behave better in the future.
 - Shame is unhelpful, and sets us up to feel and behave badly by keeping our threat system activated.
- The key here is that we're taking responsibility for our actions, doing our best to make it right, cultivating (and communicating) an intention to do better in the future, and then *following through with it*. This last bit is important, because if we apologize for something and then just do it again, we teach others that our apology doesn't mean anything.

The Power of Practice

The assertiveness strategies we've discussed are skills. Just like any other skill, we need to practice them to be good at them. Remember, we're laying down new patterns in our brains when we practice, and that takes time. It can be very helpful to imagine yourself in a situation that triggers your anger, practice calming yourself with the soothing techniques we've covered, and then imagine using the skills to behave assertively...like practicing before the big game!

- First, practice the skills over and over, either in your imagination or by role-playing with a friend or fellow group-member. We want to do this so that the statements feel natural, rather than scripted. They will likely feel a bit strange in the beginning – but try it, and see how it works!

Once we have a handle on the individual skills, we can use our imagination to practice using them in difficult situation, and then put them into practice in our lives.

Exercise – Practicing Assertiveness

1. Sit or lay in a quiet place and bring to mind a difficult situation – one that brings up anger and other threat emotions. See if you can imagine the situations vividly, really bringing the emotions to mind.
2. Once you've got a good sense of the situation, and your emotions are coming up, use one of the soothing exercises we've learned:
 - Do a few minutes of soothing rhythm breathing.
 - Bring to mind your "soothing space."
 - Bring to mind your compassionate self, filled with wisdom, confidence, and kindness...how would this being cope with this situation?
3. Once your arousal has been calmed, imagine yourself in the situation, using one of the assertiveness skills discussed above, or the problem-solving solutions generated last week. What would you say? What would you do? Practice it, playing out the scene in your imagination.
4. If your practice is interrupted because of anger or other emotions, return to using a soothing skill until you feel comfortable, and then return to the practice. It's okay to go back and forth – the soothing skills can give you a safe "home base" to return to, whenever you need to!
5. Congratulate yourself for a job well done, and commit yourself to using these skills when the situation happens again in real life – feel good about your efforts, because this is hard work!

Keep in mind that these skills do not guarantee a positive outcome – nothing we do can do that. Life is filled with difficult situations, and many of them will not work out the way we want them to. However, we can behave in compassionate ways that are respectful toward ourselves and other people, that minimize harm to our lives and those of others, and that reflect the sort of people we want to be. Even when we can't control the situation, we can control our behavior in it, and we can work skillfully with our difficult threat systems to have happier lives. To use a metaphor – we will lose some battles, but we can win the war.

Homework for Session 11

- **At least twice in the next week, do the “Practicing Skills” Exercise around a situation that causes you irritation, frustration, or anger.**
- **On the other days, do**
 - **The Compassionate Self exercise, OR**
 - **The Safe Place exercise, OR**
 - **The Mindful Breathing, OR**
 - **The Compassionate Thinking exercise.**

for at least 10 minutes at a time. Make sure you do at least 3 different exercises during the week (don’t just do the same one every day). You can do more than one exercise per day, if you like (this is encouraged – practice is good!)

- **Keep track of these practices on the Compassion Practice Journal.**
- **Fill out the Anger Monitoring Form once during the next week.**
- **Practice the Soothing Rhythm Breathing exercise at least twice per day, for at least 30 seconds at a time (hint: you can do this while standing in line, waiting for other activities to start, and in lots of other settings as well).**

Compassion Practice Journal

Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Anger Monitoring Form

The purpose of this homework is to help you become familiar with the situations that tend to provoke your anger and the ways in which you tend to respond, and to generate compassionate alternatives. Pick one time during the week that you experienced anger, rage, or irritation.

Situation/Trigger:

Emotions:

Thoughts:

Behaviors (What did I do?)

Outcome?

What does my Compassionate Self say?

What would my Compassionate Self have done?

Session 12: Extending Compassion to Others

So far, we have talked a good deal about compassion for ourselves and others, but because this is a group about anger, much of our work has been focused on how to work with negative, threat-based emotions. However, the purpose of the Compassionate Mind model isn't just to help us work with our difficulties, but also to help us improve how we relate to other people, to help us improve the environments in which we live, and ultimately, to make a better world.

Today, we'll talk about some ways to do this. These practices can be almost impossible to do when we're in the grip of anger or other threat emotions, so we need to work with those first. Here are some exercises to do once we're calmer and ready to connect with others that will improve our relationships and help us contribute positively to the lives of others (and ourselves!). Practicing these also will help us respond differently to difficult situations – so we may be less likely to get angry in the first place.

Empathy

Empathy involves working to understand the perspectives of other people, particularly their emotional experiences and motivations.

- Why might they be behaving in this way?
- What might they be feeling?
- What might they be thinking?
- How does their behavior make sense?

When we're angry, it can feel like this other person only exists to cause us problems, but actually, that is never the case:

- No one is their worst act. There is much more to all of us than the hurtful or irritating things that we've done.
- Just as we have these difficult brains, with these active threat systems and difficult learning experiences, so does everyone else.
- Just as life can be difficult for us, filled with tough experiences and hard choices, so it is for everyone else.
- We all just find ourselves here, and we all simply want to be happy and to avoid suffering (although we go about it in lots of messed-up ways!).
- Often, when we consider the situation and the person's behavior from *their* perspective ("How does this situation feel to them? How might it make sense for them to act this way?"), we can understand their behavior and the feelings behind it.
- Even when what they have done is very harmful, we can consider possible factors in their past or background that may help us understand why they might have acted in this way.

With empathy, we try to step away from **our** emotional reactions to others' behavior, and to **connect with their experience**.

- "How does this feel for them?"

It can be very helpful for relationships when we communicate this understanding, in a "checking it out," sort of way:

- "It sounds like you're feeling unappreciated."
- "It seems like you felt attacked when I said that. Is that right?"

We can also let people know that we accept their experience as valid:

- “It makes sense to me that you would be angry when _____.”

Forgiveness

Last session, we talked about apologizing when we have harmed someone else, but many of us will have current or past experiences in which others have harmed us, sometimes causing us terrible pain, and damaging our lives.

- Forgiveness involves letting go of the negative emotions we harbor toward those who have harmed us – the anger, resentment, and grudges.
- Forgiveness does not mean we are saying that “what they did is alright,” or that we are going to let them do it again. It is simply us being willing to let go of the toxic negative emotions that we have been holding onto...because until we do that, we are still being harmed.

The Process of Forgiveness

1. Mindfully acknowledging both the harm and our pain.
 - We acknowledge that we have been harmed by someone else’s actions.
 - We also acknowledge the feelings we have in response to those actions – the anger, hurt, sadness, or whatever else we might feel.
2. Cultivating the compassionate motivation to forgive.
 - Understanding that both you and the person that harmed you just want to be happy and avoid suffering, you can make the decision to forgive

this person, and to let go of the negative feelings that you've been harboring toward them.

- We understand that doing this will benefit *us*.
- We may have sometimes asked others, "I have the right to be angry about this, right?" to validate our anger and right to hold a grudge. We have the "right" to drink poison, too...it just isn't very good for us!

3. Forgive - with empathy and compassion for them and for ourselves.

- We can recognize that just like us, they have these difficult threat systems that can take control if they don't have the skills to work with them.
- Using many of the questions we asked ourselves in the empathy section above, we try to understand the reasons why they may have harmed us. What could have led them to act in this way?
- For example, if they abused us, were they in the grips of alcohol or drug addiction when they did it? Had they been abused themselves, and learned these patterns of behavior from their caretakers?
 - This understanding does not erase the harm that they did, or excuse them from the responsibility of doing it – but it can help to reduce our anger and suffering.
- We also work to accept our own emotional reactions to the harm they caused us, which can involve grieving for the difficult times we have had in our lives because of this situation.
 - We can work with these emotions using many of the approaches we've learned during this group.

- We may even try to find some positive outcome of the harm, for example, learning patience, resilience, or how to forgive. Practicing gratitude for these aspects can help us grow in positive ways.

Positive Growth and Helping Others

While we can never change other people, we can *create the conditions* that may help to facilitate change in them – and one of the most powerful ways of doing this is by changing ourselves, by cultivating positive qualities like compassion and kindness. Every time we interact with another person, we have the potential to impact them – they see how we behave, they see the effects, and they learn from them. The truth is, you *will* impact the lives of others. The only question is, “*How will you impact them?*”

I often tell my students, “If you want to be a good parent, *become the person you want your child to be.*” The meaning of this statement is this: cultivate in yourself the characteristics you want your child to have. This applies to anyone else you might interact with – because we all learn by observing and interacting with others. Here are some qualities you might want to cultivate in yourself, which might also help those around you “move from the red into the green,” to feel safe, comfortable, and perhaps grow to behave differently because of it:

1. Patience and Calmness – by now, you have a number of skills at hand to deal with frustrating situations. Practice and use them! When others are fanning the flames, you can cool them – by doing a little breathing, and responding in a calm manner. You’d be surprised what a single “cool head” can do to change a volatile situation.
2. Compassionate Action – now that you’ve learned to observe your own distress, anger, and pain, try to notice when others are having a rough go

of it. See if you can experience compassion for them – you know how difficult our brains are...you know how hard this is for them. You know that deep down, they are like you in that they just want to be happy and to not suffer, that they have their own life filled with joys and pain, difficulties and triumphs. See if you can feel some compassion for them, and use the motivation that comes from this to provide some help. See if you can get in the habit of helping others. It feels good, and will change how you are viewed and treated.

3. Kindness – It is amazing how much impact a simple act of kindness can have. A kind smile or word of encouragement can work wonders. Just as we can experience great pain when we feel that others think badly of us, knowing that others care about us or are thinking good thoughts of us can completely turn our days around. Get in the habit of sharing a kind smile, letting others know that you appreciate the things they do, and doing little things that make others' lives a little bit better. This habit will change the lives of those around you, but no one will benefit more than you.
4. Get Creative –Pick some qualities that fit with the sort of person you'd like to be, and see if you can make them into habits. Here are some examples:
 - Try to give someone a kind smile a few times per day.
 - Write a “gratitude journal,” describing things that you are thankful for.
 - Try to purposefully show someone respect at least once per day.
 - Consider that difficult situations can be viewed as challenges – opportunities to develop patience and other positive qualities – rather than as problems.

- Extend your practice of mindful awareness to more and more activities – really pay attention to the experience of eating, walking, showering, etc...
- Exercise! Get your body moving!
- Write a letter of encouragement to someone you know is suffering – and then give it to them (or not).
- When you see someone else, remind yourself that just like you, they have an entire life, filled with experiences – imagine them as a baby, toddler, schoolchild, adolescent, adult, older adult, and at the moment of their death. Remind yourself that just like you, they just want to have a happy life and to not suffer.

Exercise: Lovingkindness and Compassion Meditation

We've talked a lot about compassion, which is being moved by the suffering of oneself and others, and experiencing the motivation to help. Compassion and lovingkindness are like two sides of the same coin. Lovingkindness is the sincere wish that oneself and others experience peace and happiness, and the motivation to help us and them have these things.

This exercise can be done in a way that is designed to cultivate lovingkindness toward oneself, toward another person/people, or toward all beings. The first step in the exercise involves visualizing the person we wish to develop lovingkindness toward. In traditional lovingkindness exercises, which are designed to cultivate this state of kindness and warmth toward all beings, one goes through a series of visualizations, often starting with a beloved other (someone that you naturally and easily experience kindness and warmth toward), then repeating the exercise by imagining someone we feel neutrally

toward, then repeating it again with someone we feel irritated, frustrated, or angry with, then repeating it while imagining ourselves. When we're first learning the exercise, it's best to use someone that we naturally feel some kindness and affection toward – this will help us connect with feelings of kindness and warmth toward them. We need to *get to know* this experience so that we can learn to direct and feel it toward those who we don't naturally feel kindly toward (including, perhaps, ourselves).

The exercise involves bringing up the images and repeating phrases of lovingkindness while attempting to generate an emotional experience of kindness and warmth toward the person(s) being visualized. As you repeat the phrases and extend wishes of happiness, peace, freedom from suffering, and ease to the person you are visualizing, imagine them responding to your kindness and warmth with a slight smile, as they are filled with happiness and peace due to the emotions you are extending to them. Allow yourself to have a kind smile as you engage in the meditation.

The Exercise:

- Close your eyes, and form an image of yourself (or whomever you wish to cultivate lovingkindness toward).
- Recall that everyone just wants to be happy, and to not suffer. Wish that the person you are visualizing could experience happiness and peace.
- Holding the image in your mind, repeat the following phrases to yourself:

May you (or I) be happy.

May you (I) have peace.

May you (I) be free from suffering.

May you (I) live with ease.

- Repeat the phrases slowly, and easily. Hold the image of the other person or yourself in your mind's eye, and as you say the phrases to yourself, try to *feel* the wish that goes with it. If you can't feel it, imagine what it might be like if you could. Like all the exercises we've done, this takes practice.
- Repeating the phrases, continue to visualize the person. Imagine that they are filled with happiness and peace, that their suffering melts away, and that they are able to approach their life with ease. Imagine their face forming a kind, warm smile, reflecting these experiences.
- If you get distracted, simply come back to the phrases. Let this be easy, and fun. As you finish the exercise, allow yourself to experience the satisfaction of having extended kindness and warmth, recalling that you and all other beings simply want to be happy, and wishing that for all of us.

A Word in Parting

Congratulations! You've reached the end of the group, and hopefully have learned something about how your brain works, how to handle anger and other difficult emotions, and how to experience compassion toward yourself and others.

Now, the work *really* begins! The key is to take the things you've learned and to continue applying them in your life – to cultivate and maintain new habits and patterns that can last for the rest of your life. This is can be difficult, but here's a secret – once these new patterns are well established, they will tend to continue – just as the old negative habits did. The key is to practice them, over and over – remember, you're wearing in the new paths, and letting the old ones slowly erode.

You may be wondering when you will see the effects of your efforts. People often think that change happens suddenly, like the sun shining through a sky that was cloudy just a moment before. In my experience, the process of real change is more like watching the minute-hand on a clock – while you are watching it, you can't see any movement at all. You never really *see* anything *change*. However, if we keep practicing, after a time we notice that although we don't remember changing, our lives are now different than they were – like looking back up at the clock and noticing the hands are in different places. We just look at our lives and notice that it has been weeks since we yelled at anyone, that we can't remember the last time we spoke unkindly to our spouse or children. We notice that we have many more positive interactions with others, or that we have more friends than we used to, or that things just seem to be going better for us.

This is how it works. The key is to keep going, keep practicing, one small step at a time. There will be setbacks and problems, but the secret is to keep pointed in the direction you want to move, and when you fall down,

get up, dust yourself off, and take another step. You *will* fall down, which is why having compassion for ourselves is so important. It isn't easy, but most things in life aren't easy, not the things that really matter – you've known this for years. You are worth it, and *you can do this*.

Appendix: Additional Exercises

In the next few pages, we've included some additional exercises to use in developing your compassionate self and working with your soothing system. Using these exercises can help to develop and build upon the compassionate skills you've learned in this group. You will likely find yourself drawn to some more than others – so start by using the ones you like or which seem easier for you, and as time goes by, you may choose to stretch yourself by trying some which seem more challenging.

Compassionate Letter Writing

Recall that all the exercises we are doing are designed to help us develop a compassionate self – to build and strengthen the mental patterns that will help us find the courage to face difficult experiences, to accept ourselves, and to build a sense of peace within ourselves that we can share with others.

Learning to think and reason compassionately can sometimes be helped by writing a letter to ourselves. In this exercise, we are going to write about difficulties, but from the perspective of our compassionate minds.

- First, get out a pen and paper. You might even pick out a special journal or notebook – something you like – in order to do your compassionate writing.
- Spend a few moments doing soothing rhythm breathing. Allow yourself to settle into your experience.
- Now try to bring forth your compassionate self. Connect with your compassionate mind, as you imagine yourself at your best – your calmest, your wisest – your most caring. Feel yourself expanding slightly and feeling stronger. Imagine yourself as a compassionate person who is wise, kind, warm, and understanding. Picture your manner, tone of voice, and how you feel as this compassionate being.
- When we are in a compassionate frame of mind, even slightly, we try to use our personal life experiences wisely. We know that life can be hard. We offer strength and support, and try to be warm, nonjudgmental, and non-condemning. Take a few breaths and feel that wise, understanding, confident, compassionate part of you arise – this is the part of you that will write the letter.

- If thoughts of self-doubt like “Am I doing it right?”, or “I’m not really feeling it” arise, just note these thoughts as normal comments our minds like to make, and simply observe what you are experiencing as you write the best that you can. There is no right or wrong...we’re just practicing, working with our compassionate selves. As you write, try to create as much emotional warmth and understanding as you can.
- As you write your letter, try to allow yourself to *understand and accept* your distress. For example, you might start with, “I am sad, and I feel distress. My distress is understandable because...”
- Note the reasons – realize that your distress makes sense. Then continue... “I would like myself to know that...”
- The idea is to communicate understanding, caring, and warmth while helping ourselves work on the things we need to address.

Guides to Letter Writing:

When you have written your first few compassionate letters, go through them with an open mind and see whether they actually capture compassion for you. If they do, see if you can spot the following qualities in your letter:

- It expresses concern and genuine caring.
- It is sensitive to your distress and needs.
- It helps you face your feelings and become more tolerant of them.
- It helps you become more understanding of your feelings, difficulties, and dilemmas.
- It is nonjudgmental and non-condemning.
- A genuine sense of warmth, understanding, and caring fills the letter.

- It helps you think about the behavior you may need to adopt in order to get better.
- It reminds you why you are making efforts to improve.

Example Letter:

“Dear Jim,

This has been a difficult week for you and it makes sense that you are having a number of strong feelings. You have been trying very hard at working with your anger, and it’s easy to feel disappointed and upset with yourself when you see yourself acting in ways that you’re not proud of. Remember that your anger is a part of a threat system that you didn’t choose, and that it is not your fault that you experience it. Habits run deep, and they are hard to change. This is important to remember, particularly if you’re beating yourself up right now. You have been very courageous in taking responsibility for your anger and in learning to work with it, and you deserve compassion, too. Learning to direct your mind in new ways is difficult, and you won’t always get it exactly right. It is okay to feel however you are feeling right now. The fact that you are feeling bad right now means that you care about doing better, and is a sign that your hard work is paying off, even when it is hard to see. Maybe there are some skills you’ve learned that might help? You’ve always liked the safe place exercise. Or perhaps you could chat with Robert about how you’re feeling – he always listens to you and tries to understand. So try to cut yourself a break, and remember that you are doing this to set a good example for your son and daughter. They deserve your love and compassion, and so do you.

Love,

Jim ”

Creating the Compassionate Ideal

First, engage with your soothing rhythm breathing and bring up a compassionate expression; bring to mind your soothing space – the sounds, the feel, and the sights. Remind yourself that this is your place and it delights in you being here. This may now be the place where you wish to create and meet your compassionate image. You can imagine your image being created out of a mist in front of you, for example, or just appearing. The image may be walking toward you. In some Buddhist practices, the student may imagine a clear blue sky from which images emerge.

This exercise is to help you build up a compassionate image, for you to work with and develop (you can have more than one if you wish, and they can change over time). Whatever image comes to mind, note that it is *your* creation and therefore your *own* personal ideal – it is designed to give you what you need to feel cared for. However, in this practice it is important that you try to give your image certain qualities – complete and perfect compassionate qualities that are there for you to practice creating and bringing to mind:

A Deep Commitment to you – a desire to help you cope with difficulties and to relieve your suffering, and to take joy in your happiness. (this is important – experiencing that this being loves you and wants you to be happy and free from suffering will help stimulate your mind in helpful ways)

Strength of Mind – it is not overwhelmed by your pain or distress, but remains present, enduring it with you.

Wisdom – gained through experience – it truly understands the struggles we go through in life. It understands that we all “just find ourselves here,” and are doing the best we can.

Warmth - conveyed by kindness, gentleness, caring, and openness.

Acceptance – it is never judgmental or critical. It understands your struggles and accepts you as you are. However, remember too that it is deeply committed to help you and support you.

Don't worry about remembering all of these – you'll be reminded of them as we go through the exercise.

Here are some questions that might help you build an image:

- Would you want your ideal compassionate image to feel or look like? Would it seem old or young? Male or female? Human, or non-human looking (such as an animal, a tree or ocean, light)?
- What colors and sounds are associated with the qualities of wisdom, strength, warmth, and non-judgment represented in your image?
- What would help you to sense their commitment and kindness toward you?

One of the key experiences is that your image *really wants* for you to be free of suffering, to be able to deal with your difficulties, and to flourish. It knows that we all just find ourselves here, living as we do, trying to make the best of our minds and lives. It understands that our minds are difficult, that our emotions can sometimes feel uncontrollable, and that this is not our fault.

Practice experiencing this feeling - that another mind really values you and cares about you unconditionally. Now focus on the idea that your compassionate ideal is looking at you with great warmth, and that it has the following deep desires for you:

- That you be well and at peace.
- That you be happy.
- That you be free of suffering.

The key to the exercise is *not* the clarity of the visualization. Some people don't see their images in any clear way at all. The key is to have a mental experience of another mind wishing for you to flourish – to experience another's compassionate desires being directed toward you.

You might have the thought, "Yes, but this is not real. I want somebody real to care for me." The exercise might even bring up sadness in you, if it makes you feel the lack of such a person in your "real life." This is very understandable, and is an example of your intuitive wisdom seeking connectedness. The point to remember is that we are trying to tackle your own attitudes toward yourself, particularly feelings of self-criticism and shame. While it may indeed be desirable to find people who are caring, it's also very helpful to learn to create these feelings within yourself – so that you can learn to direct compassion toward yourself (rather than shame and self-criticism). We can't always control whether or not we have others available to care for and nurture us, but we can learn to direct these things toward ourselves – and both of these types of experiences can help to create new patterns in our minds.

Compassionate Ideal Worksheet

How would you like your compassionate image to look or appear?

How would you like your ideal caring, compassionate image to sound (for example, tone of voice)?

What other sensory qualities can you give to it? What is it like?

How would you like your ideal compassionate image to relate to you?

How would you like to relate to your ideal compassionate image?

Extra Forms

Exercise: Problem Solving

Bring to mind a difficult situation in which you tend to get angry. Think about the various aspects of the situation. It can help to use a “When (this happens) , then (that happens)” format.

Situation:

From the perspective of your Compassionate Self, think of possible responses and their consequences (consider objectives, relationships, and expression, short-term and long-term)

1.

Consequences:

Objectives -

Relationships -

Expression -

Consequences:

Objectives -

Relationships -

Expression -

Consequences:

Objectives -

Relationships -

Expression -

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1.

Consequences:

Objectives -

Relationships -

Expression -

2.

Consequences:

Objectives -

Relationships -

Expression -

3.

Consequences:

Objectives -

Relationships -

Expression -

Compassion Practice Log

Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Compassion Practice Log

Day	Type of Practice and How Long	Comments – What was helpful?
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		