



*Compassion in*  
HIGHER EDUCATION

# Compassion mentoring

**A guide to peer group activities for  
higher education students**

**Nyyti ry**



NYTYI RY

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01

*Introduc*

# 1 Foreword: Why is compassion needed in higher education?

According to researchers, the individual-focused competitiveness of the world of higher education has created challenges for the mental health and well-being of students around the world. In addition to competitiveness, the assumed focus on self-interest is thought to have a negative impact on students' health and well-being and their chances of succeeding in their studies. From a learning environment perspective, young people are particularly challenged by socio-cultural and emotional factors related to the changing state of society and our planet.


“ The increase in mental health problems among higher education students since the 2000s is challenging higher education communities and student health services to develop tools to support community well-being.

Major issues, such as climate change and loss of biodiversity are challenging the role and purpose of higher education more than ever. In the face of the big questions of the future, higher education can be seen as a stepping stone towards 'full humanity'. Alongside its purpose, there is also an ongoing reflection on *how* education is delivered: How do we create conditions and learning

environments that provide a safe space for students that is conducive to learning and preparing for a meaningful future?

Young students are exposed to a number of factors that can have a negative impact on their physical and mental wellbeing and capacity to learn. Differences in socio-economic backgrounds mean that students face widely different barriers in their day-to-day life and the challenges towards their mental health vary. Prevailing social and academic pressures undermine coping and learning ability, as do environmental factors in childhood and adolescence that put a strain on mental health.

The increase in mental health problems among higher education students since the 2000s is challenging higher education communities and student health services to develop tools to support community well-being. There is a growing interest in the field of community wellbeing development



specifically towards compassion-based interventions. Promising results have been achieved in promoting compassion-focused approaches in higher education from a learning and well-being perspective, and interventions are currently being developed, including in the university network in the west led by the University of Hertfordshire.

The core task of higher education institutions is to help students learn. They can, therefore, also be seen as caring organisations that could take it upon themselves to assess the ways in which the world of academia can be made caring and supportive from the student's point of view. The big question for wellbeing is how do we promote a good socio-emotional learning environment where students are seen as individuals, could succeed together, and find meaning in their studies? The rapidly expanding field of compassion research has brought new and applicable perspectives to the issue.

This handbook introduces the peer pedagogical approach known as compassion mentoring, developed in the joint project "Compassion in Higher Education" (2019–2021) between Nyyti and the University of Jyväskylä. The positive results of the compassion mentoring pilots in terms of strengthening compassion skills and the sense of belonging to a group make this a promising approach to be adopted throughout the higher education sector. This handbook serves as a practical guide to organising compassion mentoring in your own university, both for the university staff organising the activities and for the students acting as peer mentors in the compassion mentoring groups. The first chapter contains a description and framework for the university staff of the model to support in its implementation. The second chapter contains information on the practical coordination for the staff arranging for the activities and acting as supervisors. The third chapter provides guidance to students acting as compassion mentors in facilitating the group process and building compassionate group dynamics. The fourth chapter covers the topics discussed in each group session, complete with materials and practical exercises.

On behalf of the project, I would like to thank the University of Jyväskylä for its committed, systematic approach and cooperation in developing compassion mentoring as a new pedagogical tool for wellbeing in higher education. Our warmest thanks go to Tapio Anttonen, M.A., the designer of the Student Life model, whose determination and vision have contributed to the development of the model structures. A big thank you also goes to Tommi Mäkinen, M.S.S., a university lecturer at the Teacher Training Institute for his valuable contribution, his extensive knowledge of interaction skills and group work



and catching enthusiasm in the development of compassion mentoring and mentoring training. We also wish to thank Eija Hanhimäki, Ph.D., M.Ed., university lecturer for her cooperation and inspiring role as the key person in the compassion mentoring co-pilot. Eija's "co-passion" and insight have left their mark on compassion mentoring, which continues to be developed by the Department of Education at the University of Jyväskylä. Finally, I would like to warmly thank the compassion mentors and students who led the groups in the compassion mentoring pilots.

One of the key messages of this handbook relates to the nature of compassion not only as a skill that can be developed, but also as a deeper motivation towards rewarding, more caring social relationships and a meaningful, self-directed life.

We hope you enjoy and find inspiration in this handbook!

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02

Compassion

## 2 Compassion mentoring in peer groups

Compassion mentoring is a peer mentoring model for students, which Nyyti has developed within the framework of the Compassion in Higher Education project at the University of Jyväskylä from autumn 2019. It supports the culture of compassion and “co-passion” in the university environment, with a strong focus on the community rather than on the individual.

“ Compassion mentoring groups have been important meeting places for like-minded students from different parts of a university.

Compassion mentoring is a peer-to-peer activity for students to explore compassion together and strengthen compassion and self-compassion skills. The groups are led by trained students, known as compassion mentors, who work in pairs. The groups discuss themes related to compassion and do various exercises to strengthen compassion skills. The aim is to, together, develop an understanding of compassion and its meaning, as well as the ability to act compassionately towards others and oneself. What is particularly important, however, is the encounter itself and pausing together in the middle of the day to day – enacting compassion in real life. Compassion mentoring groups have been important meeting places for like-minded students from different parts of your university, and have given the participants a strong sense of belonging to a group. The results of the compassion mentoring pilots can be found on the Compassion in Higher Education website.

Compassion mentoring is designed for groups of about 10 students within one higher education institution or from several institutions in the same area. There are six group sessions, each with its own theme, and each session will last two hours. The organising higher education institution is responsible for the induction and support of the compassion mentors who run the groups, as well as for the general coordination of the activities, such as advertising, registration, venue bookings and

collecting feedback. Nyyti, which ran the Compassion in Higher Education project, will continue to offer mentor training for higher education staff to support mentor's work.

Compassion mentoring is designed to be conducted face-to-face, and this is the ideal way to organise the activity. However, the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic during the project led to a trial of remotely facilitated mentoring, with fairly good results. Remote facilitation is, therefore, possible, and in this handbook we also present variations on remotely facilitated compassion mentoring exercises developed for this purpose.

## **The purpose and approach of compassion mentoring**

Compassion mentoring focuses on building a compassionate group experience, with compassion mentors facilitating groups as peers rather than taking on a strong expert role. Compassion mentoring shifts the usually rather individual-centred emphasis on practising compassion towards a collaborative learning process, where the focus is on a shared reflection on the promotion of compassion and on skills exercises that can be done both individually and together.

Through compassion mentoring, it is possible to increase students' understanding of the importance of compassion in relation to different contexts: their own lives, studies, local communities, society and our changing planet.

The set of compassion mentoring exercises is structured according to the components or prerequisites of compassionate action proposed by CoPassion researchers Anne Birgitta Pess and Frank Martela:

- Presence and attention
- Placing yourself in the other person's situation
- Finding courage to take action
- Compassion towards yourself
- Accepting compassion
- Recognising and supporting compassion in others

These areas are seen in compassion mentoring as skills that can be strengthened through practice and discussion.

The groups are designed to be flexible and participatory. The exercises, background materials and basis for the group sessions presented in the handbook serve as a guideline, allowing you to tailor the activities and focus the content according to the interests of the group. The activities are, therefore, not rigidly defined, but can be modified depending on the needs of the participants. More important than practising compassion skills according to a specific list is to pause to reflect together on a relevant topic. Compassion mentoring is at its best as a counterforce to performance-driven action and adherence to rigid external targets.

## **Organising activities in your own university**

Compassion mentoring can be organised in a higher education institution by one person, a work pair or a team. There are two types of organisational tasks: the practical organisation and coordination and providing training and support for mentors. The supervisor should be someone with knowledge about small group facilitation. It is particularly rewarding to have two supervisors, not least because this is a good way to practically model for future peer mentors what it is like to work in pairs.

When organising compassion mentoring, it is also worth considering who will form the network supporting the work of this core team in your institution. Who can help with the advertising of the groups? Who will award

the credits for compassion mentoring? With whom can compassion mentoring organisers share their ideas?

It is important to think about and define the role of compassion mentoring in student wellbeing in higher education. Compassion mentoring is a peer-to-peer activity for students, and this is important to keep in mind when communicating about groups, so that they are not loaded with expectations that peer mentors are not in a position to meet. It is important, for example, to consider what forms and sources of other support are available to students, to which students involved in compassion mentoring can be referred for support and help if necessary.

## **THE STAGES OF COMPASSION MENTORING FROM AN ORGANISER'S PERSPECTIVE**

In the Compassion in Higher Education pilots at the University of Jyväskylä, compassion mentoring groups were organised three at a time, and six compassion mentors were trained to lead the groups for each compassion mentoring implementation. In the following is a brief step-by-step description of the compassion mentoring process as it was implemented in the compassion mentoring pilots; this chapter also explains these different steps in more detail.

- The process started with a search for compassion mentors and initial discussions. Induction times were agreed on with the mentors and the times that would be convenient for the mentors to meet as a group. On this basis, mentor pairs for the mentoring groups were formed and the final meeting times for the groups were agreed on.
- The compassion mentors attended three induction sessions of about half a day each, leaving some preparation time between the last induction session and the start of the group sessions.
- Once the group session times had been agreed on with the tutor pairs, the groups were advertised at the university. Compassion mentors also participated in sending the invitation message through different channels.
- The organiser received and confirmed registrations, answered questions, provided meeting rooms for the groups and Moodle platforms for the mentoring groups' own communication; and sent welcome messages and an initial questionnaire to participants about a week before the first sessions.
- During the 6-7 weeks of the compassion mentoring groups, there was one mid-way learning session of the compassion mentors, and a final session at the end of the process.

- Finally, feedback was collected from group members and mentors. The mentors wrote a reflection paper on which they received written feedback from the supervisor.

The estimated time for organising the mentoring according to these steps including the induction was 15–18 working days (plus the working time of a possible second supervisor for the induction and for the mid-term and final sessions and their planning, 4–5 working days). In terms of time, the work of the organiser and supervisor is divided into stages over a period of just over one academic term. It is advisable to recruit compassion mentors towards the end of the previous term, so that the compassion mentoring induction and advertising of the groups can begin as soon as the semester starts.

## **ADVERTISING OF GROUPS AND REGISTRATION**

In the project's pilot projects, compassion mentoring groups were advertised on the university campus in collaboration with the university communications, welfare officers, student union and student organisations, and the local Student Health Services office. The advertising channels used were online news, newsletters, email lists and social media channels.

In addition to contact details, the registration form collected information about the faculty and year, and there was also space for "other comments" for possible accessibility requests, for example. Registrants received a confirmation of registration, and closer to the start of the groups, a welcome message with practical information, such as where the group would meet, the programme for the first session and instructions on how to join the group's Moodle platform and how to report any late arrivals or absences. Registrants were also asked to notify well in advance if they were cancelling their participation, so that those on the waiting list could be given a place or available places could be advertised.

Participants were also sent an initial questionnaire with questions intended to both support the participant's preliminary reflection on the meaning of compassion and self-compassion and, thus, support induction to the activity, and to provide information on the participants' wishes and expectations for the activity.

Examples of the groups' advertising message, registration form and initial questionnaire can be found in the appendices.

## **BECOMING A COMPASSION MENTOR AS PART OF YOUR STUDIES**

Facilitating compassion mentoring groups is an accessible way of making a positive impact on your learning community while supporting your personal development and professional skills. Students who have acted as mentors in the compassion mentoring pilots have found the role to be very interesting and professionally orientating and a unique opportunity to gain practical experience of facilitating a group. In principle, the group can be led by any student who is interested in the topic and in leading the group. In the pilots, students of education, psychology and management have applied as mentors, and in one pilot the compassion mentors were students completing the pedagogical studies in adult education at the University of Jyväskylä.

Being a mentor can support a wide range of studies that prepare for working with people. Compassion mentors learn the skills of facilitating a group, facilitating discussion and leading exercises; the content of compassion as a theme and a skillset; and reflection on their own agency. Being a mentor is a responsible task that develops important work-life skills, and can rightly be awarded credits.

The scope of the activity is designed to be equivalent to 2 credits (54 hours) of university studies:

- Induction and sessions between mentors 22 hrs
- Facilitation and preparing for group sessions 22 hrs
- Reflection exercise 10 hrs

## **Recruitment, induction and support for compassion mentors**

Compassion mentoring is suitable for students from a wide range of backgrounds. The most important characteristics of a mentor are an interest in and commitment to the role, a willingness to meet people as equals, the ability to listen and the ability to reflect on their own actions.

In the compassion mentoring pilots, compassion mentors were either sought from the entire university, for example through subject associations, or from a specific study programme.



In the compassion mentoring pilots, applications were processed on a first-come, first-served basis (this should also be mentioned in the application form), and in cases where there was an open university-wide call for application, personal introductory interviews were held with the applicants for the compassion mentoring groups. The purpose of the interviews was to get to know each other and to discuss the role of the compassion mentor and the applicants' motivations, expectations and aspirations for it. The purpose of the discussions was not to evaluate and select mentors, as it was our assumption that those who were interested in the job were also suitable for it. The structure of the interview

- The applicants were asked to tell us about themselves and what made them interested in being a compassion mentor, as well as their thoughts on compassion in the higher education community. The supervisor(s) also talked about themselves and their own thoughts on compassion in higher education.
- They explained the activity and its principles, the role of the compassion mentor, what is expected of mentors and what support is available to them.
- Ideas and thoughts about the activities were discussed, as well as any concerns the applicant might have and the areas in which he or she especially would need support as a mentor and what he or she hopes to gain from the induction.

During or immediately after the initial discussions, a search began to find suitable induction times and suitable times for the meetings of the compassion mentoring groups. The latter were also used as the basis for the pairings, and this neutral way of "selecting" the pairs proved to be successful. The mentors themselves did not have to worry about finding a partner, and their choices did not have to be based on superficial judgements about which mentors might make a good fit.

## **INDUCTION OF COMPASSION MENTORS**

The compassion mentors' inductions were guided by the idea of hands-on learning, where the inductions and the sessions between the compassion mentors are a group process similar to the compassion mentoring groups, with its accompanying components, and the methods and exercises are tested in practice. This allows the trainees to observe and reflect on group facilitation during induction, and also to try it out for themselves: one pilot project experimented with students practicing leading compassion mentoring exercises for other group members already during the inductions.

## The inductions included

- Introduction to compassion (covered through a short lecture and discussion exercises, while getting a feel for discussion methods)
- Discussing topics related to group activities and being a mentor, including
  - Planning and building a group session
  - Supporting group formation
  - Peer-to-peer role, the role of the mentor, boundaries
  - Creating a safe space
  - Facilitation of discussions, methods of organising discussions
  - Managing challenging situations
  - Working with a pair
- Experimenting with discussion methods that support compassionate interaction
- Familiarisation with exercises and testing them in practice

During the inductions, the aim was to explain the purpose of the exercises and to pause to discuss how the different exercises and methods felt and whether there were any suggestions for improvement. Compassion mentors themselves often have experience of different group situations and can, therefore, share excellent suggestions for improvement. For this reason, it is well worth the effort to set aside enough time for discussion and reflection during induction.

Sample introductory texts can be found in the appendices to this handbook. Note that in the induction sessions structured in this way, there were hardly any lectures on the theory of peer mentoring and group facilitation, as the participants learned about these contents on their own in a video lecture viewed outside the sessions. The outline of the contents of this lecture can be found in the Compassion Mentors' Guide section, and the sources mentioned in this section also make good background reading on the role of the mentor.

If the plan is to organise the compassion mentoring entirely remotely, it is also advisable to organise the inductions remotely to model how the group will work remotely in practice. Remote working made extensive use of guided round-table discussions, breakout rooms and working on platforms such as Flinga and Padlet.

## COMPASSION MENTOR SESSIONS AND OTHER SUPPORT

It is important to provide spaces for the mentors where they can discuss together, share experiences and deepen their learning along the way. In the pilots, the mentors had joint mid-way and final sessions to share their experiences and reflections on group mentoring, to discuss together any questions or challenges that may have arisen in mentoring, and to reflect on their own mentoring and learning as a group mentor. Appendix 4 of this handbook contains the proposed framework for the mid-way and final sessions, including different methods. In addition, at the end of the whole process, the compassion mentors wrote a short reflection paper reflecting, among other things, on their own learning about compassion and small group facilitation; what insights the group had about compassion; what observations they had made about their own compassion group work and its development during the process; and in what ways they felt facilitating the group affected their own ability to support a compassionate atmosphere in their own learning communities or other groups.

In addition to joint sessions, it is important for the supervisor to be accessible and available to the compassion mentors should they have questions or concerns about the activities, or if they just wish to exchange ideas. The ways of communication should be agreed on during induction. There should also be a named neutral person or body to whom the compassion mentors can turn to if necessary. If the supervisor is also the person approving the compassion mentor's credits, this may form a barrier to speaking freely about all matters related to mentoring.



03

*For the mento*

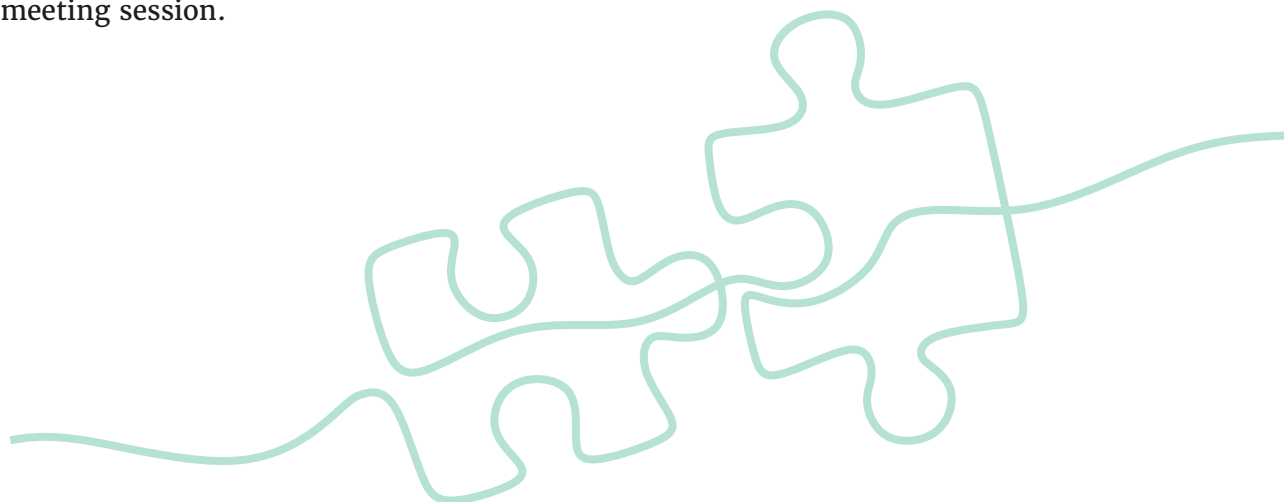
### 3 Guide for the compassion mentor

Being a peer facilitator in a compassion mentoring group is an interesting and rewarding way to contribute to one's own study community, meet new people, and gain practical experience in facilitating small groups. Those who served as compassion mentors in the Compassion in Higher Education project pilots found the task to be inspiring and energizing, as it provided a low-threshold opportunity to learn about facilitating small groups. Additionally, the compassion mentors felt that they had learned deeply about compassion and its practice.

“ The task of a compassion mentor is to guide the themes of group meetings, facilitate collective learning and reflection on compassion within the group, without the requirement of being an expert on the subject.

The task of a compassion mentor is to guide the themes of group meetings, facilitate collective learning and reflection on compassion within the group, without the requirement of being an expert on the subject. They are supported by their own mentoring pair, and mentors receive comprehensive orientation for their task as well as the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and deepen their learning in mentor meetings during the mentoring period.

This handbook serves as a support for facilitating a compassion mentoring group. This chapter addresses the facilitation of a compassion mentoring group and the role of the facilitator. Chapter 4 includes, the structures of compassion mentoring meetings, exercises for different meeting sessions, and background theory related to the topics of each meeting session.



## Peer mentoring groups and the role of the peer facilitator

Compassion mentoring in a peer group is an activity that emphasizes peer support, interaction, and the collective construction of knowledge as a group. Mentoring usually refers to activities that support professional learning and growth. Compassion mentoring, on the other hand, can be seen as supporting personal and societal growth as an individual and an actor in the world, through the strengthening of shared understanding and competence related to compassion.

The different styles of mentoring vary from a knowledge transfer model that emphasizes the mentor's greater experience, where the mentor advises and shares their experiences, to a support or coaching role, and even to peer mentoring, where the mentor and mentee are seen as equals, and the interaction involves collective thinking, sharing experiences, and learning from each other. In group-based peer mentoring, it can be understood that the group itself acts as the mentoring entity, even though it has designated facilitators.

Compassion mentoring takes place in small groups. Small groups are defined as groups with a maximum of about ten members, where the core focus of the group's work, in this case, compassion, can be addressed together, and experiences and thoughts related to the topic can be shared. In a small group, in addition to the facilitator, group members support each other's learning. Peer groups prioritize shared discussion and support from peers.

The group facilitator has several possible concurrent tasks, and their emphasis depends on the activity. Based on Vehviläinen's categorization (2014, pp. 83–84), the activities of a compassion mentoring group facilitator can include:

**Coordinating the group's activities and providing general leadership or facilitation.** The facilitators plan the flow of each meeting, provide information to the group about the activities, and guide the group's collective work during the meetings.





**Teaching the group effective interaction:** what constitutes good (compassionate) communication, how to listen attentively, speak respectfully, etc. The facilitator also addresses any potential issues in communication.

**Observing and addressing emerging thoughts and themes in the group:** the facilitator, for example, highlights the themes that arise during discussions and connects them together, potentially shares their own observations about what is happening within the group, and verbalizes things.



**Utilizing expertise related to the theme.** In compassion mentoring, the facilitator's role as an expert is not central, but their own knowledge can be brought in to support the group's reflections at appropriate moments.

How does the concept of peer support affect the role of a compassion mentoring group facilitator? For example, the dimensions of peer support outlined by Karjalainen and colleagues (2006) - existential, epistemic, and juridical-ethical - are worth exploring when shaping the role of a peer mentor. In brief, in compassion mentoring, group members are peers in many ways, often even in terms of their knowledge and skills related to compassion. However, the group facilitator holds the overall responsibility for supporting the situation and guiding the group (ethical responsibility).

One can contemplate and shape their role as a compassion mentor by using the four questions shown in the table below (Source: Voimaa opiskeluun project).

The table also includes some examples of reflections from peer facilitators who participated in compassion mentoring pilots.

**What does a compassion mentoring group facilitator do (tasks)?**

- Takes care of the facilities, informs the group about matters.
- Plans the group sessions.
- Leads the introduction, conclusion, provides instructions for exercises, and creates the structure.
- Facilitates the establishment of rules.
- Supports team building, for example, through exercises.
- Welcomes the participants upon arrival.

**What can a compassion mentoring group facilitator do if they wish?**

- Share personal experiences.
- Modify the meeting so that it feels more "me".
- Gather more information about a specific topic area.

**What does a compassion mentoring group facilitator not do (limitations)?**

- You don't have to take responsibility alone.
- You don't have to have an answer to everything.
- You don't have to strictly adhere to the plan.
- You don't have to constantly be available for participants' questions outside of group meetings. You can limit your availability.

**What should a compassion mentoring group facilitator never do under any circumstances?**

- Break the sense of safety and acceptance.
- Belittle someone's experience.
- Does not monopolize the attention.
- Does not favour or prioritize participants.
- Break trust.



## Working with a mentor pair

Compassion mentoring groups are facilitated together with a mentor pair. Vehviläinen (2014) describes the following benefits of working with a mentor pair:

- It lightens the burden on the individual as the responsibility can be shared, allowing both mentors to bring their strengths and skills to the table, without one mentor having to handle everything alone.
- Working with a mentor pair helps to view the happenings in the groups from different perspectives and enables a more balanced view of both the group and one's own actions.
- It allows for the division of roles, for example, with one facilitating and the other taking on an expert role or an observing role focused on interaction.
- It supports collective learning and strengthens one's own mentoring skills.

The compassion mentors who participated in the pilot projects of compassion mentoring found this co-facilitation model to be highly effective. In particular, we heard about the benefits and support provided by working with a mentor pair. They mentioned how much assistance and support they received from their partner in reflecting on their own group facilitation, as well as in dealing with self-criticism. Having another person's perspective on how their own actions appeared was invaluable. One of the mentors eloquently described how they realised that relying on one another is a strength, not a weakness.

Collaborative mentoring requires careful pre-planning and coordination to ensure smooth guidance sessions. It is important to establish clear roles and schedules to ensure a smooth mentoring experience and prevent the mentor pair's actions from appearing unclear or contradictory. However, maintaining a shared approach does not mean rigidly sticking to a predetermined plan. Mentors can openly negotiate the next steps based on changing situations or emerging issues within the group. This also demonstrates to the group that the mentors take responsibility for leading the situation.

In addition to pre-planning, it is valuable to invest in debriefing the group meetings together with the mentor pair afterwards. This includes sharing observations and lessons learned, as well as providing feedback to one another. This helps in developing collaborative mentoring, deepening one's own learning in mentoring, and addressing various emotions that arise in guiding the group.

## Supporting a compassionate group experience as a facilitator

Compassion mentoring groups provide peaceful spaces for reflection, connection, and collaborative learning. This is supported by emphasizing getting to know each other, building group cohesion, and fostering good communication and a safe atmosphere. This section describes practices that support the group's activities, interactions, and the development of a safe environment. It also addresses how to handle challenging situations that may arise during the group's activities.

### PRACTICES AND METHODS TO SUPPORT GROUP WORK

#### Getting to know the group

At the beginning of group activities, it is worthwhile focusing on getting acquainted and sufficient time should be allocated for this purpose. Additionally, participants should have name tags displayed initially, and for this, the facilitators can bring paper and markers to the meeting. Introductions can be done in various ways, while being aware that introducing oneself “freely” may be nerve-wracking for many, and their attention is diverted towards thinking about what they will say when it's their turn. To facilitate introductions, one or a couple of easily approachable (not performance or externally defined) questions can be asked, allowing individuals to share about themselves (for example, “What is your favourite way to unwind from studies during your free time?”). Here are some ways to structure the introduction round:

- **Pair Introduction:** Participants have a 7-minute conversation with their partner, followed by each pair presenting themselves to the group (2–3 minutes per pair). Many find this to be less daunting than introducing themselves to the whole group, and it provides an opportunity to practice attentive listening. Sharing about someone else may feel easier than sharing about oneself. This exercise is playful, as most people don't remember the details they hear. Pairs can help each other to recall the details mentioned.
- **Introduction Round:** The facilitator introduces themselves (e.g., name and major) and shares something about themselves. Then, they ask a question about the everyday life of the person sitting next to them (the question can be light-hearted, such as “What's your relationship with indoor plants like?” or “Beach vacation, city trip, or activity holiday?”). The next person states their name and major, answers the question, and poses a question to the next person, and so on.

## **Creating group rules**

The group's self-established and collectively agreed-upon practices or rules help to create a safe shared space for the group. Reflecting on what rules and practices one would hope for also helps to address any concerns related to previous negative group experiences.

Rules can be created in the following way:

- Discuss with a partner or in small groups: What rules or practices do I think would be beneficial for the group?
- Propose 3–5 rules or desired practices. The facilitators can also suggest rules (at least confidentiality should be addressed, unless it comes from the group members)
- Discuss together, write down the rules, and distribute them to the group in written form after the meeting.
- You may discuss, for example, the following things:  
confidentiality (an agreement not to disclose the personal matters of group members outside the group but allowing for discussions on a general level and ensuring anonymity when discussing group topics), communication among group members, attendance policies, speaking and listening in the group, right to participate or refrain from participating, participants' personal responsibility and boundaries (addressing guidelines for sharing personal information within the group).

## **Opening and closing rounds**

A brief “check-in round” at the beginning of a meeting serves as a bridge to the world outside the meetings and helps participants to settle into the session. It allows individuals to articulate and become aware of their current emotional state and, gradually, let go of any distracting feelings, such as a sense of rush. During the closing round, participants have the opportunity to express what kind of impression the meeting left on them and begin the process of reflecting on and digesting their learning and experiences. The check-in round can be done simply by asking participants, one by one, to briefly share, in a few words or sentences, how they are feeling as they come into the meeting or what mood they will carry with them after the session.

## SUPPORTING, ACCEPTING AND PRESENTING INTERACTION

Discussions are a central form of work in compassion mentoring groups. The accepting, present, and compassionate approach to discussions can be supported in various ways. Drawing from Vehviläinen's "Ohjaustyön opas" (Guide to Counseling Work) and adapted for the development of compassion mentoring, some of these ways include:

- Utilizing structured discussion formats such as rounds, where each participant has a turn to speak, and their contributions are listened to attentively. This ensures that every group member has an equal opportunity to speak and be heard. Rounds are also a good way to enhance symmetry in the conversation, especially when the activities are conducted remotely. In such cases, the rounds can proceed alphabetically based on the first names of the participants.
- Communicating to participants that when speaking, they can start from their own thoughts, experiences, and meanings without the need to argue, "know", or convince others.
- At the beginning of a round, it is helpful to mention the available time or provide guidance on the desired length of speech. This reminds group members of fairness and establishes calming boundaries.
- The facilitator supports an accepting atmosphere through their calm demeanour. Through their presence and, perhaps, verbal articulation, the facilitator conveys that issues (including complex and confusing ones) can be worked on calmly, accepting various emerging aspects.
- A deliberately calm and paced progression allows space for the unexpected and for emotions that may arise.
- Flexibility: If a topic arises that is different from the planned agenda, it can be addressed if deemed to be relevant by the group and facilitator, and agreed upon collectively.
- Voluntariness: Everyone has the right to speak and be heard, but they also have the option to be silent and listen if they wish. Not everything needs to be verbalized; a thought or insight may be valuable even without being articulated.
- The facilitator's metacommunication, where they verbalize the direction being taken, the reasons behind certain actions, and other choices related to the progression of the work, supports presence.

## SUPPORTING A SAFE GROUP EXPERIENCE

In addition to the aforementioned practices supporting group activities and interactions, the atmosphere of the group can be influenced in many small ways:

- **Predictability:** Participants receive clear information in advance (e.g., where to meet up + possible arrival instructions, exact starting time, whether participants need to bring something to the meeting or if any preparation is required, what is included in the first session, etc.), predictable structures such as opening and closing rounds.
- Greeting and welcoming each participant when they arrive at the meeting.
- Shaping interaction dynamics in a way that even the more reserved individuals feel comfortable and can speak up. Especially at the beginning, favouring pair and small group discussions may be helpful. Facilitators can join groups if needed to ensure even numbers. In remote meetings, pair and small group discussions work well, for example, by using Zoom's breakout room feature.
- Dividing participants into pairs or groups by facilitators using neutral criteria (e.g., sitting next to someone, dividing into groups matching the desired number, or humorously, according to the colour of their shoes). This way, no one feels left out.
- The facilitator's role as a support for the group: The group needs someone who ultimately guides the process, sets boundaries, and supports the activities. The facilitator doesn't have to be perfect in this role or always know the right way to act, but demonstrating the intention to support the group's activities creates a sense of safety.
- Expressing that everyone should be aware of their own boundaries regarding personal sharing, regardless of how other group members may share. Participants have the right to assess their preferred level of openness and refrain from sharing personal matters, even if others are speaking very openly.
- Sensitivity, especially in mindfulness and visualization exercises: These exercises should not be imposed unexpectedly but mentioned, for example, at the beginning of the session when going through the agenda. Emphasize the voluntary nature of the exercises and reassure participants that if, for any reason, an exercise doesn't feel right, they are not obliged to do it.

## HANDLING CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

In any group process, facilitators may encounter challenging interaction situations. Therefore, as part of preparing to facilitate a group, it is important to reflect on how to approach these situations and how to respond to them.

When facing challenging situations, it is essential to remember that each group member has their own responsibility for shaping the group's interactions. As a facilitator, you do not need to blame yourself if challenging interaction situations arise. However, you can take steps to address and handle these situations. In the pilot phases of compassion mentoring, we have discussed possible challenging situations in group facilitation together with compassion mentors and have developed approaches to deal with them.

Here are some examples of considerations, but, most importantly, it is advisable to reflect on potential difficult interaction situations and how to handle them in advance with your co-facilitator. Consider your own preferred ways of responding in such situations.

**Scenario: There seems to be a lack of discussion or participation in the group.**

**Try:**

- Acknowledge that it's okay to reflect quietly and that silence is acceptable.
- "I notice now that... I wonder what the reason for this might be?"
- Divide into smaller groups.
- Quiet contemplation or writing tasks before the collective discussion.

**Scenario: The conversation is unevenly distributed; someone dominates the discussion.**

**Try:**

- Utilize structures that support the symmetry of the conversation, such as rounds, using a speaking topic, or written reflections.
- Engage in exercises that focus on conscious listening.
- "I would now like to hear from those who haven't spoken yet."
- Quiet contemplation or writing tasks before the collective discussion.

**Scenario: Questioning the activities, methods, etc.**

**Try:**

- Be open and curious about criticism, ask for more information. What does the participant wish for?
- Explain the background and purpose of exercises, methods, etc.
- Modify the working approach if many find it challenging; in many exercises, the methods can be varied.
- Suggest trying it this way for now and if it doesn't work, we can replace it with something else.
- Request anonymous written feedback on the activities.

**Scenario: The topic visibly evokes emotions such as grief.**

**Try:**

- Convey with a calm demeanour that the emotion is okay, and it is acceptable to feel that way in this situation.
- "I notice that the topic has a strong impact, and it is understandable. Let's take our time with this matter; there's no rush to move forward."
- "We can discuss this further if you'd like, but you don't have to speak if you don't want to... If it's okay with you, others can continue the discussion on the topic, and you can listen and join in again when you're ready."

**Scenario: A group member raises support needs that cannot be addressed within the peer group.**

**Try:**

- Have a private conversation with the group member to discuss different resources and support available within their own university or local community.

The facilitator cards designed to support dialogue facilitation, such as the Erätauko method, also contain many useful strategies and concrete examples of how to act or what to say in challenging situations.



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04

Groups

## 4 Compassion mentoring group meetings

Compassion mentoring is designed as a six-meeting series where we explore compassion from various perspectives, engage in exercises to strengthen compassion abilities, and utilize interactive methods that support compassionate interactions. Above all, these meetings provide an opportunity to come together and learn in a compassionate atmosphere.

“ In group meetings you pause to connect, discuss, and learn together about compassion.

During the group sessions, we practice compassion through guided exercises, discussions utilizing methods of compassionate communication, and experiments between the meetings. This includes exercises that promote a compassionate mindset, mindfulness practices, moments of pausing and listening during the discussions, observing compassion in our own environment, experimenting with expressing compassion in our everyday lives, exercises to empathize with others, and identifying our own and others' strengths as part of compassion and empathy.

The following summary presents a condensed outline of the content and themes developed during the pilot sessions of compassion mentoring. More detailed content can be found in the individual sections for each meeting.

These themes have proven to be effective during the pilot of compassion mentoring, but the contents and emphasis of the meetings can also be tailored based on the interests of the group.

During the first meeting, time is allocated for discussing the content of compassion mentoring and participants' expectations. When planning group sessions, flexibility and adaptability in the program are recommended. No exercise is so crucial that it should cause rushing or bypassing meaningful interactions within the group. Therefore, when planning meetings, it is worthwhile considering which exercise can be adjusted or given as an optional homework assignment.

During the meetings, it is possible to openly negotiate with the facilitators and the group if something feels compelling: "We had planned to do exercise x at this point, but if you prefer to continue this discussion, it's also possible, if it suits everyone." Perhaps surprisingly, the creation of a relatively detailed (minute-by-minute) schedule can help to maintain an unhurried atmosphere, even though deviations from the schedule are likely to occur in practice. With a precise schedule, it becomes easier to understand the meeting's timeframe and see what needs to be shortened or omitted if there are deviations from the original plan.

Meetings usually include some form of discussion, group or individual exercises, and sometimes short presentations by the facilitators. In between the meetings, some everyday observation tasks or experiments have also been suggested.

When introducing exercises, it is useful to explain to the group the background and purpose of each exercise. The instructions for the exercises should be presented quite concisely and made visible in writing whenever possible, either by using presentation techniques or by providing written instructions placed in the centre of the circle, for example.

**Theme: What is compassion, and why is it needed?**

**Contents:**

- Getting to know each other, including the creation of group rules together. Exploring the concept of compassion through discussions.
- Loving-kindness meditation.

**Theme: Is there compassion in my world?**

**Contents:**

- Discussion and review of the homework assignment “Notice compassion around you.”
- Discussion exercise on factors influencing compassion.
- Visualization exercise on receiving compassion.

**Theme: Self-compassion**

**Contents:**

- Introduction, self-compassion exercises, and a discussion task about imperfection.

**Theme: Compassion, me and other people**

**Contents:**

- Exercises and discussions about personal boundaries, rights, and empathizing with others’ perspectives.
- Visualization exercise.

**Theme: Freely chosen theme**

**Contents:**

- Theme discussions chosen freely (e.g., compassion and future skills, compassion and social change, or deepening the theme of self-compassion).

**Theme: Your own and others’ unique strengths**

**Contents:**

- Getting to know character strengths, appreciative pair discussion and final reflection.

## Meeting 1:

### What is compassion? Why is it needed?

The first meeting is dedicated to getting to know each other as a group, agreeing on common working methods and guidelines, orienting towards future collaboration, and exploring the basics of compassion.

#### Program

- Arrival, crafting name tags
- The facilitators welcome the participants, introduce themselves, and outline the meeting's program (5 min)
- Icebreaker and introductions (see tips from Chapter 3) (20 min)
- Brief presentation of the themes and objectives of compassion mentoring, as well as the group's main task (5 min)
  - It's not a course primarily focused on theoretical learning but based on shared experiential learning
  - Exploring compassion and self-compassion together, practicing skills
  - A place for calming and connection amidst everyday life
  - Peer learning group (not a therapy group, and the facilitators do not have such training)
- Informally discussing participants' wishes. Wishes can be written on post-it notes and collected in one visible place. The facilitators can verbalize the wishes they observe arising within the group and how these aspects will be addressed in future meetings. (10 min)
- Agreeing on group guidelines (description can be found in Chapter 3) (20 min)
- Discussion task on compassion + group discussion and introduction (35-40 min)
- Loving-kindness meditation (10 min)
- Instructions for the homework assignment
- Closing round (5-10 min) (see Chapter 3)



## **Discussion task: What comes to mind when you hear the word “compassion”?**

*Duration: 35-40 minutes*

Based on the question “what comes to mind when you hear the word ‘compassion’?”, participants will engage in a discussion and gather their thoughts together.

- In small groups or pairs (4-5 pairs or groups, preferably changing the previous pairs). First, individuals can reflect on their own for a moment and then discuss with their partner or small group.
- Write associations and keywords on post-it notes, for example (approximately 10 minutes)
- Pairs or groups take turns sharing what topics emerged in their discussions. Gather the post-it notes together in one visible place (5 x 2 minutes)
- Conduct a joint discussion and comments, possibly with an introduction to compassion from the facilitators (20 minutes)

For remote meetings, pairs and groups can gather in private rooms on platforms like Zoom, and thoughts can be collected on working platforms like Padlet or Flinga.

During this discussion task, facilitators can introduce fundamental information about the concept and significance of compassion for individuals and community well-being, utilizing the background summary provided at the end of this meeting description. This can be done through a brief introduction and, possibly, a few slides, reflecting the content on the thoughts gathered on post-it notes. We have also compiled a list of reading recommendations at the end of this handbook, which can be shared with the group.



## **Exercise: Loving-kindness meditation**

*Duration: approx.. 10 minutes*

Loving-Kindness Meditation, based on the Buddhist meditation tradition (metta bhavana), strengthens feelings of warmth and kindness towards others and ourselves. It focuses on unconditional kindness, which extends to all living beings, including ourselves.

For example, in Barbara L. Fredrickson and colleagues' research (2008), a regular practice of loving-kindness meditation increased the positive emotions of participants and, consequently, their personal resources.

Start the exercise by taking a moment to breathe calmly. You can lower your gaze or, if it feels comfortable, close your eyes.

- Bring to mind someone dear to you; for example, a family member or a friend. Visualize this person in your mind. Reflect on how this person, like all others, wishes to live a happy, good, and meaningful life. Silently say to your dear one in your mind:
  - “I wish for you a rich and meaningful life. I wish you health and safety. I wish for you to be kind to yourself. I wish you peace of mind.”
- Next, focus on yourself. Think that you, just like your loved ones and all other people, wish to live a happy, good, and meaningful life. If you like, place your hand on your chest as a gesture of self-compassion. Silently wish for yourself the same things that you wished for your loved one, with as kind and warm a mind as you can:
  - “I wish for myself a rich and meaningful life. I wish for myself health and safety. I wish to be kind to myself. I wish for myself peace of mind.”
- Repeat the phrases one more time.
- Shift your attention to a person you don't know particularly well, such as a coworker, a store employee, or someone else you feel neutral towards. This person, too, wishes to live a happy, good, and meaningful life. Wish them:
  - “I wish for you a rich and meaningful life. I wish you health and safety. I wish for you to be kind to yourself. I wish you peace of mind.”
- Next, extend your well-wishes to a broader circle, such as your family, the residents of your town, your country, or the entire world. Choose a group and wish for them:
  - “I wish for all of us a rich and meaningful life. I wish us health and safety. I wish for all of us to be kind to ourselves. I wish us peace of mind.”
- Take a moment to return to calm breathing.
- Open your eyes and return to the room. Thank yourself for doing the exercise.



The text of the exercise is based on the practice from the book “Itsemyötätunto” (Self-Compassion) by Grandell (2015) and is published with the author’s permission.

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## Homework assignment: Notice compassion around you

### Instructions

Observe manifestations of compassion around you: Do you see people being present for each other and helping one another? Do you notice people showing care for others, whether they are close or far away? Has someone helped you in some way? We will discuss these experiences in the next meeting.




## Background: What is compassion and why is it needed?

Established definitions of compassion refer to noticing the suffering of others and having the desire to alleviate it. Compassion consists of three stages (see, for example, Pessi & Martela 2017):

- Noticing
- Desire to help
- Action

Compassion begins with being present enough to notice another person’s emotional state. Compassion includes goodwill towards others and a desire to help, in some way, to alleviate their suffering. The third part that makes compassion real is the act of helping, where we do something to reduce the other person’s suffering. The action can be as small as asking a question, a few kind words, or a touch.



Compassion is related to the concept of empathy, and these two terms are often used to mean the same thing. However, conceptually, empathy differs from compassion.

Empathy involves understanding (cognitively perceiving) another person's emotion and perhaps even identifying with that emotion (sharing the emotion at an affective level), but it does not yet include the elements of goodwill and action. In compassion, the feeling of empathy is specifically combined to and leads to kind actions.

In addition to compassion directed towards others, we can also show compassion to ourselves (self-compassion is discussed in more detail in the materials for meeting 3). Paul Gilbert, the developer of Compassion-Focused Therapy and a professor of clinical psychology, envisions three directions for compassion, and full compassion includes all of these: receiving compassion flowing from others to oneself, compassion flowing from us to others, and self-compassion developing within ourselves (Gilbert 2015). For example, Finnish researchers on compassion in the CoPassion project have also discussed the concept of "myötäinto" or "co-passion", which refers to empathizing with and showing support for the positive emotions, successes, and joy of others (Pessi et al. 2017).

### **Compassion at the core of humanity**

Compassion has played a role in human evolution as a characteristic that is unique to humans: caring for offspring and cooperation within one's own community and between communities have been advantageous for human survival. Research in primatology, developmental psychology, neuroscience, and behavioural economics emphasizes that we are not only self-interested and competitive but also caring and oriented towards cooperation (Jinpa 2015).

Within us, there seem to be two operating systems running in parallel. For instance, Paul Gilbert has conceptualized human brains as having "new" and "old" brains. The old brain, over 200 million years old, the so-called reptilian brain, is not oriented towards building communities but focuses on individual survival. Its functioning is largely transmitted through our genes, giving us the ability to recognize and respond to internal and external threats. In contrast, the new mammalian brain has unique features, such as an interest in caring for offspring and establishing human relationships and social communities to create a safe and healthy environment for growth (Gilbert 2010).

The idea of compassion at the core of humanity may contradict our conception of humanity. The modern Western view of humans is individualistic, and in our societal thinking, we tend to focus on human actions through competition and selfish motives. In philosophical, political, and economic thinking, it has become customary to explain human behaviour from the perspective of self-interest, to the extent that other explanations have been considered to be inherently untenable. This view of humanity also operates as a self-fulfilling prophecy because, with this narrative, we approach each other with fear and suspicion instead of seeking compassion and connection. (Jinpa 2015.)

As an extension of this assumption of humans primarily being selfish, we may also be mistaken in considering the actions of those known to demonstrate compassion as somehow superhuman and unattainable for the average person. However, each of us has a natural inclination towards compassion, although a challenging upbringing, for example, may bring out other aspects at the expense of compassion. We can also strengthen our compassion by practicing it. Knowledge of brain plasticity from brain research shows that, for example, practicing mindfulness can influence the functioning of our brains. Developing compassion is about cultivating and strengthening our better qualities. (Jinpa 2015)

### **The significance of compassion**

The effects of compassion are extensively studied, and many benefits have been found both at the individual and broader community levels. According to the review by Pessi and Martela (2017):

- Studies suggest that strengthening compassion increases positive emotions, a sense of meaning, and even cognitive abilities. The impact of compassionate actions is evident in the extensive research on the effects of volunteering on the mental and even physical well-being of volunteers.
- People reflect and mirror each other's emotions, and emotions spread in communities, including compassion. Compassion promotes positive social relationships, where our energy and vitality increase, where we wish good for each other, and where we can handle conflicts.

- In work and study communities, compassion has not only positive effects on general well-being but also on the quality of work. When engaged in creative work, innovation, and problem-solving, we need a safe and accepting atmosphere that allows us to be present as full human beings and courageously bring forth ideas and different opinions. A compassionate and caring atmosphere also fosters mutual assistance and knowledge sharing, which are essential in both work and all communities.

Compassion is also a societal and global matter (see, for example, Seppänen et al., 2017).

- How do we treat people in vulnerable positions in our society? Do we have trust and willingness to build a common ground, or do we divide ourselves into camps of “us” and “them”? Are we striving to understand and do our best to eradicate various injustices?
- Ekman and Ekman (2017) also talk about global compassion because we live in a world of interdependence. Our actions have global impacts – for example, think about how Western consumption habits affect the global South, and how this is viewed from the perspective of compassion. In a world of increasing crises, our ability to cooperate and live well together becomes crucial.

### **Do I dare to be compassionate?**

However, the idea of compassion raises doubts in many of us, as described by Jinpa (2015). We may wonder, for example: What if others take advantage of my kindness or become dependent on me? Does everyone really deserve compassion? Can compassion enable wrongdoing if we simply try to understand others’ actions and turn a blind eye to things?

A closer examination of compassion helps to dispel these concerns. Compassion is not about submission, nor does it exclude the possibility of defending oneself, even while trying to understand another. It is not about coddling, but, rather, a genuine attempt to act for the good of the other. Compassion means expecting constructive and right behaviour from others, even while understanding their challenges. A compassionate attitude does not mean accepting injustices.

We may also fear that we cannot handle the suffering of others. A possible excessive emotional involvement in another's suffering or the world's atrocities (being personally distressed by another's suffering, rather than concerned for the other) can cause emotional strain, which, in turn, can lead to avoidance, indifference, and apathy (Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009). In this regard, the action-oriented nature of compassion is helpful because, while it involves witnessing suffering, it is an empowered state where the focus is on doing good and taking action (Jinpa, 2015).

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## Meeting 2:

### Is there compassion in my world?

The theme of the second meeting is the ability to recognize and receive compassion, as well as understanding the factors influencing compassion and the obstacles to compassion.

#### Program:

- Opening round (10 min)
- Discussion task: Recognizing and receiving compassion (review of homework) (30 min)
- Guided visualization exercise: Allowing compassion to flow within yourself (15–20 min)
- Discussion task: Factors influencing compassion (45 min)
- Homework: Discussing compassion and self-compassion
- Closing round (10 min)



### Discussion task: Recognizing and receiving compassion

*Duration: 30 min*

In this discussion task, we will examine real-life moments of compassion. It builds upon the previous homework, but the exercise can also be done during the meeting by recalling experiences. The discussion can be done in pairs (or groups of three) where participants take turns sharing their experiences and discussing them (about 10–15 min). Then, as a group, everyone can collectively process the experiences and thoughts raised. The facilitators will complement the discussion by describing the significance of recognizing and receiving compassion in strengthening compassion (see below). Finally, if time allows, there will be open conversation.

Guidance for the discussion: Describe a situation in which you either witnessed or received compassion, or both. You may consider the following points:

- What happened in the situation? What did the person displaying compassion do? How did witnessing compassion feel? How did the recipient of compassion react?
- How did receiving compassion feel? How did you respond to the gesture of compassion directed at you? If receiving compassion feels challenging, how could you be more open to receiving acts of compassion?

The facilitators can print out the above activating questions for participants or display them on a projected slide or board. In remote meetings, pairs and groups can gather in Zoom breakout rooms, for example.



## **Background:** **The significance of recognizing and receiving compassion**

In their article “How to promote compassion in everyday life,” compassion researchers Anne Birgitta Pessi and Frank Martela ask, “Are you able to accept compassion?” and “How do you act as a bystander?”

Receiving help, compliments, acts of compassion, and gestures of care is important. You might think that it is weak to accept help, or that you don’t deserve compliments, or that it is selfish to sincerely accept praise. However, if you consider it more broadly, the matter appears differently. Receiving these gestures is important for the giver as well, as it brings them joy and meaning in their actions. Rejecting offered help or acts of compassion and empathy from others can hurt the other person. Receiving compassion is not taking away from others; on the contrary, it nurtures its spread because we set an example and lower the threshold for giving and receiving compassion.

The ability to accept compassion also strengthens our own compassion towards others. Compassion can also be reinforced by seeing it around us. Compassion spreads and passes between individuals and groups. Witnessing compassion is invigorating, and in these moments, we see the world around us not as cold and harsh, but as kind and humane. This encourages us to act compassionately ourselves. Acknowledging when someone else acts compassionately and giving them recognition – “that was beautifully done” – reinforces a culture of compassion.

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## **Exercise:** **Allow compassion to flow within yourself**

*Duration: 15-20 min*

Tip: Prepare for the exercise by recalling a situation where someone showed kindness towards you or helped you. However, it's best not to choose a situation where someone showed kindness during an emergency, as the purpose of the exercise is not to focus on distress, but on the desire to be kind and help others. Think of a more neutral situation where someone showed kindness towards you.

Don't worry about remembering the situation exactly right, or if bringing the imagery to mind feels difficult - the visualization can be vague or general. The essential thing is to focus on compassion and freely imagine how the objects of your visualization could affect your senses and emotions.

### **Exercise**

Start with calm breathing for about a minute or until your body starts to settle down a bit. Once you feel sufficiently calm, prepare for the exercise by adjusting your body posture to be compassionate. Put a compassionate expression on your face.

When you are ready, think about the situation where someone showed kindness towards you.

First, recall the facial expressions of the person who showed you kindness for about a minute. It may help to imagine the person walking towards you, or smiling, or nodding their head.

Then, focus on the sensory sensations related to your important memories as follows:

- Focus on what the person said and the tone of their voice while speaking. (Spend about a minute on this.)
- Next, focus on the person's emotions - what they felt towards you at that moment. (Focus on this for another minute.)
- Finally, concentrate on the overall experience. Perhaps the person touched you or helped you in some other way. Notice the feeling of gratitude and the joy of being helped. Allow the gratitude and joy from being helped to grow inside you. Keep your expression compassionate. Spend a little more time with this memory.



When you are ready, let your memories fade slowly and return to the present moment.

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## **Background:** **The background of visualization exercises**

Not all training in compassion is verbal. Visualization exercises focus on both the mind and the body, and they can be used, among other things, to strengthen positive perceptions of others.

In mindfulness exercises, there is no imagination; the focus is on the flow of internal and external stimuli through our minds. However, visualization exercises intentionally direct the mind towards compassion. Exercises that concentrate on compassion visualization are originally based on traditions related to Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Additionally, many other spiritual traditions and therapeutic approaches have also emphasized the promotion of compassion and interpersonal relationships through mental imagery.

Working with mental imagery activates various physiological systems in our brains and bodies without external stimuli. If our thinking style is self-critical, we are constantly stimulating our threat system. When we develop compassionate imagery and thoughts, we can more easily calm ourselves in threatening situations. Visualization stimulates certain brain areas, especially systems related to affiliation and calming (oxytocin/endorphin). These systems foster specific positive emotional states, which increase feelings of safety, self-assurance, and well-being while weakening the threat system. It is very beneficial to learn how to cultivate mental states that can alleviate our threat system.

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## **Discussion task:** **Factors influencing compassion**

*Duration: 45 minutes*

In this exercise, we will reflect together and become aware of the factors that positively or negatively influence the experience of compassion. Discussion in small groups, for example, dividing into two groups for discussion (20 minutes). Facilitators will join the groups to facilitate the discussion and act as scribes. The discussion format can be free-flowing or structured, for example, in rounds. Some guiding questions for the discussion:

- In which situations is it easy vs. difficult to understand and treat others kindly?
- What factors do you recognize that influence the ease or difficulty of experiencing compassion in these situations?

Collective discussion (approx. 15 minutes), bringing forth the thoughts that arose within each group. Facilitators will complement the discussion based on background material about “Factors Influencing Compassion.” Finally, more collective discussion (approx. 10 minutes):

- How could we act to become aware of these obstacles to compassion? How could we overcome them?



## **Background:** **What influences compassion?**

Zen teacher Joan Halifax talks about ‘watering the seeds of compassion,’ referring to the idea that compassion is inherent in humans. However, various factors can influence the emergence and expression of compassion. A person’s upbringing can impact compassion: whether compassion has been allowed to develop or whether the harshness of the environment has brought other aspects to the fore (Pessi & Martela 2017).

Even more significant than a person’s individual traits or background are different situational factors (see Weisz & Zaki 2017). Why does everyone sometimes find it challenging to approach others with compassion?

Assessment of the situation and the suffering person affects compassion.

- For example, experiencing someone's vulnerability, neediness, or undeserved suffering evokes compassion (Batson 2017). On the other hand, holding someone in envy, arrogance, moral ambiguity, etc., reduces the compassion felt towards them (see Goetz & Simon-Thomas 2017). This involves moral outrage, which Roshi Joan Halifax mentions as one of the enemies of compassion in her TED Talks presentation "Compassion and the true meaning of empathy." Moral outrage reflects anger and disgust, categorizing people into good and bad, condemning and blaming others, which closes the possibility of a more compassionate perspective on the situation.
- People perceived as being close and similar to ourselves evoke more compassion than those perceived as being distant and different because we tend to experience affective empathy more readily towards those who are similar to us (see Goetz & Simon-Thomas 2017).
- It is easier to feel compassion towards individual people rather than a suffering group of people (Cameron 2017). Similarly, problems occurring here and now elicit compassion more readily than problems far away and in the future. Societal problems do not always involve such personal connection that would naturally evoke compassion (Batson 2017).
- Problems in the here and now vs. problems far away and in the future – the former elicit compassion and a desire to act more readily.
- The feeling of capability: the assessment of whether we can help. If we feel somewhat helpless, we may start "turning off" compassion in our minds and dismiss compassion (see Goetz & Simon-Thomas 2017). The state of our own well-being and the feeling of "having nothing to give," or the fear of empathy burnout, may also be related to this.
- Perceived threat to oneself or perceived "costs" of compassion can also influence a person to regulate their feeling of compassion lower (Cameron 2017). Fear is one of the enemies of compassion, as mentioned by Joan Halifax.
- Joan Halifax also highlights pity as one of the enemies of compassion. With this, she refers to the attitude of positioning oneself above the suffering person. Pity involves the idea that this does not concern me or that this could never happen to me. Pity, thus, distances us from the experience of shared humanity related to compassion.

- Time pressure as a situational factor strongly influences compassion and concrete acts of compassion. In the well-known study “The Good Samaritan Study” (Darley & Batson 1973), it was found that time pressure was the decisive factor in the willingness to help, despite all participants in the study (all seminary students) being presumed to be particularly oriented towards compassion. Those who were told that they were already late for a lecture were less likely to stop and help a person lying on the ground (an actor playing a role in the experiment) than those who had plenty of time (see also Ekman & Ekman 2017).

### **Environment and organizational culture:**

- Cultures that emphasize individuality, competition, and persistence reduce humanity and compassion within communities (Pessi 2017).
- Compassion can be confusing if the culture does not encourage it at all. Fear (or a painful memory) of being rejected for a compassionate gesture can also prevent the expression of compassion (Pessi & Martela 2017).
- Competitive settings: if success in competition is considered to be paramount and compassion hinders one’s chances of winning, there is pressure to suppress compassion (Weisz & Zaki 2017).

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## Homework assignment: Discuss compassion and self-compassion

In this homework, continue the small group discussion on factors influencing compassion by discussing the topic with a friend or family member.

### Instructions: Have a conversation with a friend or family member about the following

- In which situations is it easy vs. difficult to understand and treat others kindly?
- What kinds of things seem to influence the experience of compassion?
- What about our attitude towards ourselves? In which situations is it easy vs. difficult to treat ourselves with compassion (kindness, understanding, encouragement...)?
- What kinds of things seem to influence the experience of self-compassion?

If you don't have a suitable discussion partner available, you can reflect on the questions related to self-compassion by considering the small group discussion on factors influencing compassion. At the same time, you prepare for the next group meeting, where we will discuss self-compassion.

## Meeting 3: Self-compassion

At the third meeting, you will learn about self-compassion and perform exercises that strengthen self-compassion. In the description of this session, we have compiled several possible alternative exercises to choose from according to what is best suited for each group. In addition, it is possible to continue the theme of self-compassion at meeting 5, if the group so wishes.

The exercises should be done at a calm and gentle pace. The themes can feel quite personal, so it is worth reminding that everyone has permission to participate and share their thoughts at the level that feels good to them. As with all meditation exercises in group situations, an alternative to closing your eyes is to focus your gaze downwards.

### Program

- Opening round (10 min)
- Introduction to self-compassion (approx. 5-10 min) (see “Background material for self-compassion”)
- Self-compassion exercises (40-50 min)
- Discussion task: Imperfection is common humanity (30-40 min)
- Vote on the content of the 5th meeting: theme session (e.g. compassion and working life, compassion and future skills, compassion as a tool for social change) OR self-compassion
- Tip for doing at home: self-compassion diary
- Closing round (10 min)



## Background on self-compassion

Compassion involves not only recognizing another person's suffering, but also the desire and intent to alleviate the suffering of another and its causes. Self-compassion is about projecting the same attitude towards one's own suffering, regardless of whether it is caused by external or internal factors.

Compassion is often seen as coming from oneself. To work compassionately with our own suffering, we need to recognize situations in which we suffer rather than try to avoid situations where that suffering occurs. The essence of self-compassion involves a non-judgmental approach to one's own pain, imperfections, and failures so that they are seen as part of a broader experience of humanity. According to various studies, self-compassion is strongly linked to a person's psychological well-being, and its significance is emphasised in difficult moments and life situations.

A higher education environment in which studying is characterised by individualistic goals, study orientation and strong self-direction challenges self-compassion. It can be easy to think and act harshly towards oneself by demanding, for example, perfection from one's own performance. Self-compassion is a skill and way of relating not only to ourselves, but also to those challenging feelings and thoughts that we have not chosen.

In this background material, we explore the concept of self-compassion through the three elements of self-compassion outlined by Kristin Neff; the effects of self-compassion on well-being; the most common fears and suspicions related to self-compassion and how to practice self-compassion.

## **The three elements of self-compassion**

Kristin Neff, associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas, is one of the pioneers of self-compassion research. She has conceptualized self-compassion into a measurable form by developing a threefold definition of it. Although the elements have also been studied separately from each other, they overlap with each other and, when self-compassion is activated, interact with each other:

- 1.** *Kindness towards oneself, accompanied by encouragement and understanding towards oneself*
- 2.** *Acknowledging a common humanity that involves a sense of belonging to other people in times of suffering and pain instead of separation*
- 3.** *Accepting mindfulness, which involves carrying one's present experience in a balanced way, without overidentifying or avoiding the present.*

## **Kindness towards oneself**

When we make a mistake or fail, we may be more likely to berate ourselves than offer ourselves support. Self-criticism is associated with lower self-compassion. Even if the root cause of the problem is beyond our control, we often focus on fixing the problem rather than facing our suffering and calming ourselves. A self-compassionate person relies more on a very effective coping mechanism when accepting adversity, i.e., restoring their mental well-being.

Kind talk to ourselves brings with it more tolerance and understanding for our own mistakes and failures, while, at the same time, being able to recognize that perfection will in fact always remain beyond the reach of a person. Self-compassion is indeed expressed in friendly speech towards ourselves, which is benevolent and supportive in nature (not cruel and disparaging). Kind talk to ourselves helps us to move forward and act constructively in challenging situations.



## **Shared humanity**

The element of common humanity has to do with the nature of humanity and the fact that everyone sometimes fails, makes mistakes, and acts in an unconstructive way. It is typical of us that we pursue things that we do not yet have and must face our difficult experiences, even though we prefer to avoid them.

Most of the time, when faced with difficulties or failures, we feel separate from other people. We may then react irrationally as if suffering and failure were exceptions to the “normal”. We lose sight of the bigger picture of what is part of our common humanity. Also, when things don’t go well for reasons beyond our control, we often assume that other people have fewer obstacles in their way and that they may live happier lives than we do. Through self-compassion, we remind ourselves that failures and adversities in life are simply part of humanity.

## **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness, or accepting mindfulness, involves being aware of the experience of the present moment as clear and balanced. Acceptance is related to experiencing the present moment openly, allowing different thoughts, emotions, and feelings to enter our consciousness without judgment, avoidance, or identifying with them. Our ability to recognize our emotions and pain is essential for expressing self-compassion. Recognizing them is especially challenging unless we see that pain is an inevitable part of human life. The perception of pain is also especially challenging when it comes from our own self-criticism.

The repressing of negative emotions is a human tendency and, as a coping strategy, it can lead to very unfavourable behaviours, such as substance abuse, comfort eating, or social isolation. Outwardly, avoiding negative emotions may manifest itself in such a way that when faced with challenges, we may focus solely on solving the problem without noticing our emotional struggle at all.

Through accepting mindfulness, we can recognize and accept our emerging emotions. It doesn’t mean identifying with them, which would mean narrowing our attention to only these emotions, ruminating on them and increasing their harmful effects, or thinking that because I failed, I have failed in general as a human being.

## **The effects of self-compassion on well-being**

Gilbert (2015) outlines that humans have three physiological states:

- a state of threat that has evolved to protect us, in which we feel stress, anxiety and loneliness
- a state of achievement and striving, which is a positive state, but also a state that burdens the body
- a state of calm and security fuelled by compassion and self-compassion, which is healing for our nervous system

These states all have a purpose but balancing them is important. By studying the effects of the latter condition, we see that self-compassion has a positive effect on our well-being and functional capacity in many ways. Ahlvik and Paakkanen (2017) describe this as a state where we calm down and our brain's capacity is freed up for reflection, imagination and flexible thinking – in other words, strengthens creativity. We open ourselves up to cooperation and social relationships, which is a crucial factor of well-being for people.

According to Kristin Neff, self-compassion acts as an antidote to the primitive threat response in three ways: Kindness towards oneself acts as an antidote to the fighting reaction associated with self-criticism and calms us down. The experience of shared humanity acts as an antidote to the flight response, which causes the experience of separation. Accepting mindfulness is the antidote to the freezing reaction, where we get trapped in our fears and may overidentify with our emotions.

According to a research review by Ahlvik and Paakkanen (2017), there has been a growing amount of research evidence on the positive effects of self-compassion on mental well-being and, for example, creativity since the early 2000s: it relieves depression and anxiety; increases creativity, optimism, inspiration, enthusiasm and supports resilience. It has also been shown to support health-promoting behaviours in many ways. Self-compassion has also been shown to support aspects of meaningfulness in life, such as life satisfaction and a sense of belonging.

### **Doubts about self-compassion**

The idea of self-compassion may also raise doubts or fears, just like compassion (see: Jinpa 2015). For example, we may wonder if self-compassion is just a license to be lazy and underperform? Does self-compassion show that we are selfish or weak in how we face difficulties? We may wonder if it makes us look complacent or like we feel sorry for ourselves.

However, self-compassion is none of these. It is a kind and encouraging speech to oneself and self-encouragement to live according to one's own goals and values, even when it feels challenging. Therefore, it does not prevent the motivation to pursue important things yourself, quite the opposite. Nor does it mean that you do not look critically at your own actions when you need to. (see, e.g., Ahlvik and Paakkanen 2017.) And just as compassion is not pity (in which we forget our common humanity) (e.g., Halifax), self-compassion is not self-pity, but an acceptance that sometimes we fail, just like everyone else.

### **Practicing self-compassion**

Self-compassion can be strengthened through practice, for example by strengthening mindfulness, mental images and consciously changing self-directed speech into a friendly one.

Thanks to our metacognitive skills, we are able to look at how our mind works. An essential step in practicing self-compassion is to develop awareness of our own behaviour, to get to know what kinds of things raise anxiety in our minds, and what kind of antidote there is for them. Increasing self-awareness helps us to see how self-compassion can help us. We can learn to calm our anxiety and be like friends to ourselves. The great thing about strengthening self-compassion is how effortless it is: wherever we are, we can create a compassionate moment for ourselves. In this session, we have collected several such exercises to strengthen our self-compassion.

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## Self-compassion exercises



### Exercise: Body scan

*Duration approx. 5 + 5-10 min*

The exercise strengthens conscious, accepting presence. Duration approx. 5 + 5-10 min discussion. The instructor reads the exercise to the participants at a leisurely pace, after which, if desired, a short joint reflection can be taken on the feelings or thoughts aroused by the exercise.

**Description:** Body scanning is a simple, effective way to descend into the present inner world. It has been proven to be a calming, low-threshold exercise that can be done in almost any place you are; in bed before going to sleep, on the bus or in the middle of an exam reading session. Perform the exercise with your eyes closed, either standing, sitting or lying down.

**Advice:** Keep your eyes closed. First, take your thoughts outside your ears for a moment, becoming aware of sounds outside your body. Then bring your mind to your own body. Listen to your body holistically: Does it currently feel primarily light, heavy, tired or refreshed? Perhaps restless or peaceful?

Start scanning your body, bringing your attention to the highest point on the top of your head. Let your attention move as if scanning with a light, slowly down through your body. Let your attention gently touch even the smallest parts of your body: the earlobes, the area between the eyebrows, the tip of the nose, lips and the tip of your chin. Let the consciousness slowly spread downwards, moving from the shoulders downwards, towards the arms all the way to the fingertips. Calmly move your mind along your core towards your pelvic area, thighs, knees and legs. Let the scanning consciousness spread all the way to the tips of your toes.

Perform the exercise knowing that your mind is accepting your body: allow yourself, your body, its pain, or its tranquillity to be exactly what it is right now. There is no need to change anything. Body sensations do not need to be accompanied by evaluation or attitudes, special negativity or positivity. They are allowed to be exactly as they are in the present moment.

Once the scan has literally stretched from head to toe, take a moment to focus on your current state of mind. What emotion is uppermost on the surface of your mind? Try to take note of your mental state with accepting awareness, without trying to reproach or change it. Give it space to be exactly what it is, regardless of whether you feel comfortable or not.

Finally, let your eyes slowly open. Pay particular attention to how you move from the terrains of your gentle inner world to gradually become more aware of the outer environment as well.

## Reference

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## Exercise: Self-compassionate letter

*Duration approx. 20 min*

Writing a self-compassionate letter is a form of expressive writing. There is good evidence of the benefits of expressive writing (Pennebaker 1997). Writing to yourself can help people deal with difficult experiences and can be utilized in many ways.

When writing a letter from a compassionate perspective, the writer can, for example, imagine themselves as being compassionate and write to themselves from that perspective. The writer can also imagine a friend writing to them, or write about what they would like to say to their friend.

With the help of the letter, it is possible to take a small step back and empathetically reflect on one's various thoughts and feelings, as well as develop a compassionate and balanced way of working with them. The letter does not contain clear advice on what to do, but helps to reflect on thoughts, feelings and actions.

Finally, the tone of the letter can also be evaluated and, over time, the development of the tone of the letters can be monitored. Does it convey:

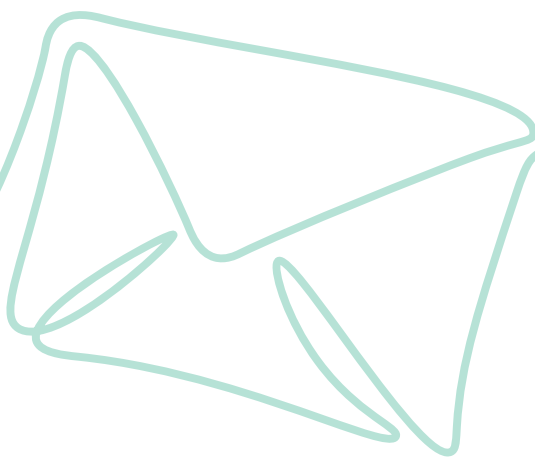
- care and genuine caring?
- sensitivity to the experienced distress and your needs?
- sympathy and being emotionally touched?
- ways to face and become more aware and permissive of your emotions?
- how to become more understanding and find different perspectives on emotions or difficulties?
- leaving aside blame and judgment?
- genuine warmth, understanding, and caring?
- possible ways to reflect on your actions, which could contribute to moving forward from the situation?

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Infor-ma plc). The exercise has been slightly shortened from the original.

**Instructions:** (The instructor explains that this is an individual assignment, at the end of which there is a short unpacking with the group, but the contents of the letter do not need to be shared to the group.)

**Individual assignment:** Write yourself a letter in which you discuss something that is topical to you and that causes internal negative speech or difficult feelings. Imagine a compassionate perspective from which you are writing (see above).

**Joint reflection:** If desired, the group members can each take turns to share their thoughts about writing a self-compassionate letter and how it felt. There is no need to share the contents of the letter. Together, the tone of one's own letter can be evaluated by using the above questions.





## Exercise: Developing a compassionate self

*Duration 10-15 min*

This exercise uses mental images to strengthen compassion (read more about mental image exercises in Allow compassion to flow in connection with yourself in the Session 2 exercise).

### Exercise

- Start by breathing calmly. When you feel that your body has calmed down (at least a little) and you feel ready to start the practice, imagine that you are a deeply compassionate person.
- Imagine all the qualities you would have as that compassionate person. Let's go over these features.
- Focus on your desire to become a compassionate person, and to be able to feel, think, and act compassionately. Then imagine yourself endowed with all the qualities of compassion. Imagine that you are calm and have wisdom (spend a moment on this). Imagine that you are sensitive and able to tolerate difficulties (spend a moment on this). Imagine being warm and friendly (spend some time around this). Imagine being non-judgmental but also willing to help, alleviate suffering, and bring change and flourishing.
- Try taking a compassionate look on your face, perhaps a small smile, or some other expression that suits you.
- Imagine yourself expanding, as if you are becoming stronger, more mature, wiser, and more confident.
- Take a moment to focus on the feeling of expansion and warmth.
- Take a moment to think about your tone of voice and the things you would say or do as a compassionate person (this can take about a minute).
- Take a moment to rejoice in your ability to be kind (you can remain here for about a minute).

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Informa plc). The exercise has been slightly shortened from the original.

At the end of the exercise, if desired, a short joint reflection on the feelings or thoughts aroused by the exercise can be taken.





## **Exercise:** **Understanding common humanity**

*Duration approx. 10 min*

This is a group exercise aimed at recognizing a shared experience of humanity in a group: I am not the only one in this world who experiences this pain or sadness. Often, when we face difficult things, we isolate ourselves from others and think that no one else has these problems, everyone else is doing great.

Instruct the group to raise their hand whenever the statement feels familiar and bring attention to the group as a whole, and tell them to look around.

### **Raise your hand,**

- ...if you've ever missed a deadline
- ...if you've ever failed at something important to you
- ...if you've ever done something stupid
- ...if you've ever looked in the mirror and didn't like what you saw
- ...if you've ever compared yourself to others
- ...if you've ever thought that others are wiser and more talented than you
- ...if you've ever hurt someone you care about
- ...if you've ever been hurt by someone you care about
- ...if you've ever thought that you're the only one experiencing these things

If you have ever thought that no one else would do this, think about this moment. We are in this boat of life together!

*The exercise has been prepared for the project by Hanne Savunen, 2020.*

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## Exercise: Restorative things

*Duration approx. 15+5-10 min*

The exercise is performed as an individual assignment, after which you can go through a round of any feelings, thoughts or insights raised by the exercise (rather than what was put in the different columns).  
Duration approx. 15+5-10 min.

**Introduction:** Taking care of one's own mind is strongly associated with resources. In order to have sufficient resources for everyday life to run smoothly and to feel well, it is important for us to know both the sources of our stress and, in particular, the things that restore us. We experience quite individually what kinds of things bring resources and energy to our everyday lives. You can't give a list of tips that work for everyone, but it's important for everyone to consider individually what are their own restorative things. After that, it is useful to consider whether the burden and recovery are in balance.



**Task:** Place a blank piece of paper in front of you and divide it in half in the middle with a vertical line. Title the left side as burdening and the right side as restoring factors.

Then list things, activities, situations, or circumstances that you find burdening, stressful, and tiring. They can be things that you can influence or factors that you just must deal with. The essential thing is to honestly open yourself up to look at the things that take up your energy. Some may also be things that provide strength and joy. For example, you may find social situations to be both important and consuming. On the right side of the paper, list factors that restore your energy. Especially when we are stressed, we often do things that make our situation more difficult, and not easier. Quick fixes like staying up until dawn or working hard won't bring about the much-needed recovery.

Therefore, take time to think about the activities, people and being that seems to best recharge your batteries, calm you down and take care of you. At this point, you must be selfish and not please others. Whose company and what kind of place and activity best restores you? The important thing is to find quite mundane and small things. What kinds of things can you anchor in your everyday life to ensure your balance and recovery from stressful moments and days? You may notice that, e.g., a quickly entertaining activity may not be as restorative after all.

The more strain there is in your everyday life, the more important it is to experience restorative moments and care. The purpose of this exercise is to help you to structure the relationship between restorative and stressful factors in your everyday life and, thereby, maintain your own resources.

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## **Discussion task:** **Imperfection is shared humanity**

*Duration 30-40 min*

The exercise strengthens the feeling of shared humanity. The exercise can be performed by everyone reading the text below by themselves (about 10 minutes) or the instructor may read it out loud. After that, a discussion can be held by using the questions below, for example, in small groups, and finally a joint debriefing (total 30-40 min).

### **Reflections on imperfection as a basis for discussion**

Our culture has oriented us to show, in most cases, the most complete, even flawless, image of ourselves outwardly. Different, unique individuality has become more desirable than unifying things. However, the pursuit of perfection can lead to hiding imperfections, and feeling alone and isolated when we experience failures. Each of us has sometimes encountered artificial roles or appearances in interaction situations.

However, hiding our true, imperfect self and the associated experience of loneliness has a debilitating effect on our health and the quality of our relationships. One might ask: What would happen if we made screwing up a moment of common humanity instead?

There is also a strong social comparison in our culture, which also makes it difficult to accept imperfection. Most people think they are, for example, friendlier or smarter than average. This perception may improve one's current self-image, but it can also increase the experience of separation. We may distance ourselves from the person we compare ourselves to when we are dissatisfied.

Comparisons also cause us to look for faults and shortcomings in other people in order to bolster one's own ego. However, there are serious consequences when our thoughts appear to be malicious towards others. This increases the experience of separation and, therefore, loneliness in relation to other people. The effects of such downward comparisons also apply when groups of people compare themselves to other groups and feel superior.

In a culture that glorifies perfection, it's easy to engage in harsh self-criticism. Excessive self-criticism can also result from the demanding people with whom we live. Even as children, we may have experienced

strong control over us, which has made us intensely self-critical. When a person experiences feelings of inadequacy and even worthlessness, it affects their emotional strength and behaviour. A person who feels worthless may inadvertently expel others from around them, either by withdrawing or defending themselves against the threat they interpret. There are even research indications that people who experience harsh self-criticism have a higher risk of suicide.



**Happier people live in relationships and cultures where even the most difficult things can be brought into a common conversation and circle of life.**

Realising the need for belonging is essential for both physical and mental health. When a person feels a sense of belonging, they also cope with difficult life situations more easily than others. E.g., working in different peer groups activates the brain's care system, as a result of which the group members begin to become friends and create a sense of security around them. There is strong research evidence on the beneficial effects of peer groups, for example, on a patient's recovery from physical illnesses.

Happier people live in relationships and cultures where even the most difficult things can be brought into a common conversation and circle of life. According to studies, covering up one's own difficulties and operating as though we had endless endurance consume our resources and limit our happiness in life. Although various difficult issues appear and affect our everyday lives, they do not have to determine our quality of life. Compassionate thinking in difficult situations means reminding ourselves and each other that everyone faces hardship and suffering. The importance of facing and dealing with difficult issues for an individual lies in the fact that they strengthen the flexibility of the mind against various challenges. This has also been studied to have an effect on the happiness of human communities.

Harmful perfectionism means the compulsive need to achieve all the goals set for yourself. In this case, the person does not allow themselves to fail, but severely criticizes themselves or experiences outright worthlessness. By overperforming, we may seek acceptance in a wider group. When self-esteem is based solely on one's own successes and not, for example, on shared humanity, this causes harm to mental health. There is also the risk of thought distortion, according to which we think that our own problems are more important than

those of others, as a result of our perfection, and we focus too much on ourselves. Especially harmful perfectionism causes some of us intense stress, feelings of inadequacy and shame. According to studies, perfectionists have a higher risk of developing many mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety.

Perfection is inhuman in nature, while imperfection is a universal human quality. Even if we try to control our lives, we cannot control the circumstances in which our lives take place. Understanding the imperfection of humanity leads us to better accept that life cannot be controlled, even if we try to do our best in different circumstances.

*Text by Laura Kallio, 2019.*

**Discussion questions:** Consider what our own culture, and your circle of friends, says about showing imperfection? Is it allowed and acceptable to show and talk about it? Do you think this can be influenced? If so, how?



## **Exercise for home: Self-compassion diary**

If during the day you felt inadequate, stressed, difficult emotions, or judged yourself for some reason, you can reflect on it through a writing process to strengthen your compassionate relationship with yourself. Use mindfulness, kindness, and the experience of shared humanity in your writing to strengthen the art of self-compassion. Even a week's practice in writing improves the skill of self-compassion (Ullrich, P.M., & Lutigendorf, S.K., 2002).

### **1. Mindfulness**

Mindfulness at this point means that you consciously bring attention to the thoughts and feelings that the event raises. Write in a journal what you felt at the time and what thoughts you recognized. Try to accept your experience, without any judgment.

As an example: *“I found myself reproaching myself after the meeting in my. I used mean words about myself, “You could have thought a little about how well to prepare for the meeting. You couldn’t answer the questions they asked. I’m an idiot, I deserve to be fired” This awakened in me a feeling of disgust and anger towards myself, which was felt in my stomach so much that I felt physically sick.”*

## **2. Shared common humanity**

Write in your journal the extent to which the experience was universal. You can consciously remind yourself that everyone messes up sometimes, it’s only human. You can also remind yourself that it is normal to feel the way you feel.

As an example: *“I think it’s natural to feel this way when you mess up at work and many others feel the same feelings. Everyone has days when they can’t reach their full potential. It’s only human to fail sometimes. Every one of my colleagues has been in the same situation at some point. I’m just a fallible person, like everyone else.”*

## **3. Kindness towards oneself**

In the journal, write comforting and kind words for yourself. If it feels challenging, you can think about what words to write to your best friend in the same situation. The beginning is difficult for everyone, which is why this is called an exercise. One gentle, comforting or reassuring word is enough.

As an example:

*“It’s okay, everyone messes up sometimes.”*

*“You tried your best, that’s enough”*

*“It’s okay darling, everything is fine, I’m here for you in this”*

*“You are loved just as you are”*

*“I accept you just as you are”*

*The exercise was prepared by Hanne Savunen, 2020. Reprinted with permission of the author.*

## **Reference**

- Ullrich, P. M., & Lutgendorf, S. K. (2002). Journaling about stressful events: Effects of cognitive processing and emotional expression. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 24(3), 244-250.

## Meeting 4: Compassion, me and other people

The theme of the fourth meeting is compassion and various encounters between people. On one hand, it's about putting yourself in the other person's shoes and seeing the other person's challenging behaviour through gentler lenses; On the other hand, the firmness and limits associated with compassion and preserving our capacity for compassion.

### Program

- Opening round (10 min)
- Exercise: Annoying behaviour! (50 min.)
- If desired, a mental image exercise from previous times, e.g. Strengthening the Compassionate Self or Kindness Meditation (can come as a refresher)
- Discussion task: My limits and rights (35 min)
- Homework instructions
- Closing round (10 min)



### Exercise: Annoying behaviour!

*Duration 50 min*

The ability to visit another person's point of view is one of the building blocks of compassion. It is cognitive empathy, i.e. the ability to consciously put oneself in another's shoes and reflect on what the world looks like from their perspective (Pessi & Martela 2017); what the other person thinks and feels (Goetz & Simon-Thomas 2017).

Visiting the other person's perspective does not mean that we must accept all other people's bad behaviour or wrong choices, but it helps us see what may be behind the behaviour, see the behaviour as an expression of suffering, and take a compassionate constructive approach to it. We can also maybe identify with the other person and see the behaviour as human – "I've behaved like that myself sometimes".



## Doing the exercise

The exercise is to imagine everyday situations where it is difficult for us to understand another person's behaviour and we get an impulse to judge, label them an idiot, react in a hostile way, etc.; and reflect on what may be behind the other person's behaviour. What does the other person feel or think about the situation, what kind of situation did they just come from, what do they have to face next?

The exercise can be carried out, for example, by first considering and describing a few such situations in small groups (approx. 10 min). The groups tell the whole group about the situations they have come up with, and these (or some of these) are written down somewhere for all to see, for example, on A4 papers taped to the wall (approx. 10 min). The explanations of the situations or the issues that may be behind the situations can then be discussed again in groups, written down on Post-it notes and attached to the wall under the paper in question (approx. 15 min). Finally, a joint examination of these and a round where everyone can share their thoughts on the background of the situations (approx. 10 min).

In remote meetings, the writing down can be carried out, for example, in Padlet, where you can write examples of annoying behaviour as column headings and under it everyone can add explanations of situations/ underlying issues.

## Sources

- Goetz, J. L., & Simon-Thomas, E. (2017). The landscape of compassion: Definitions and scientific approaches. *The Oxford handbook of compassion science*, 3-17
- Pessi, A.B. & Martela, F. (2017). Myötätuntoista ihmistä ja työelämää etsimässä. In Pessi et al. (Eds.), *Myötätunnon mullistava voima*. Jyväskylä: PS-Kustannus.



## Discussion task: My limits and rights

*Duration 35 min*

Awareness of and respect for our own limits, rights and needs play a key role in our ability to extend compassion to others. This may seem to be surprising, but our ability to feel compassion for others stems from our own coping and the feeling that we have something to give (Pessi & Martela 2017). It starts with the feeling that we have secure boundaries from which opening up to another person's suffering does not threaten us and our energies. Sticking to boundaries helps us to cope with compassion. Brené Brown, research professor of social work and non-fiction writer, says of her own awakening to the importance of boundaries: "I am a lot less sweet, but a lot more loving". The list of our own rights, which can be used as a base for discussion, can help to open up a broader view of how we are allowed to be and act when we recognise our own rights. The list and the discussion based on it can clear thoughts about how much space we can have to live and act according to our own values, refuse something that does not support it, and take care of our well-being.

### Instructions for discussion

Read the list of your rights ([www.nyyti.fi/en/for-students/learn-life-skills/social-skills/firmness](http://www.nyyti.fi/en/for-students/learn-life-skills/social-skills/firmness)) and ponder for a moment on your own and then with a partner or in a small group by using questions such as:

- What thoughts does this list raise?
- Is there something on the list that surprised you?
- More broadly: how do you see identifying and respecting one's own boundaries, rights and needs as related to compassion?

Finally, possibly a short round of thoughts or debriefing.

### References

- Pessi, A.B. & Martela, F. (2017). Kuinka edistää myötätuntoa arjessa? In Pessi et al. (Eds.) Myötätunnon mullistava voima. Jyväskylä: PS-Kustannus.



## Homework: Showing compassion for another

Over the next few days, do something compassionate or co-passionate. Ponder and prepare to share at the next meeting: What did you do? How did it feel to show compassion or enthusiasm? How did the other person react? Compassion becomes real when we are encouraged to act on it and in some way show our compassion and support for the other person. This may be even a small act; The main thing is to cross the threshold of showing compassion.

Especially in times of great need, we may shy away from showing compassion because we don't know what to say. However, even in this situation, it is worth showing that you are present. You can, for example, say that you can't put your compassion into words, but that you're here and can provide support if the other person wishes. (Pessi & Martela 2017, 305).

We can also think about what kinds of ways of listening and helping support the transmission of compassion to others. Simply listening with presence without interrupting the other person or imposing one's own interpretations or views can be one of the strongest expressions of compassion. The demonstrator of compassion does not have to, or, often, even should not, try to resolve the situation. The person showing compassion can also ask how the other person would like to be met in this particular situation: does the other person only want me to listen, or do they also want advice? Sometimes the other person simply does not accept sympathy, but rejects the gesture. Receiving compassion is difficult for many of us, meaning a rejection is probably not personal. Zen teacher Joan Halifax talks about how compassion can't become too attached to the outcome; Don't show compassion only when you know it will be received.

### References

- Halifax, J: Compassion and the true meaning of empathy, video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmWcU7UQuB8>
- Pessi, A.B. & Martela, F. (2017). Kuinka edistää myötätuntoa arjessa? In Pessi et al. (Eds.), Myötätunnon mullistava voima. Jyväskylä: PS-Kustannus.

## Meeting 5: Freely chosen theme session

This meeting will discuss compassion in a broader context through a chosen theme topic or deepen the self-compassion theme that began in the third meeting. Discussion exercises with dialogue also strengthen compassionate interaction skills, such as slowing down and examining one's own reactions, as well as the skills of listening and asking appreciative questions.

In the thematic discussion, you can try one of the discussion exercises below, and then continue the discussion informally if you have time. Instructors can briefly introduce the theme (see “Thoughts for the basis of discussion” in the theme summaries below), but both discussion methods emphasise the participants' own thinking and experiences, i.e. the intention is not to focus on studying factual information.

### Program

- Opening round (10 min)
- Short introduction to the chosen theme (5-10 min)
- Discussion of an optional theme as an exercise in appreciative asking or as a speech-object exercise + free discussion (total 90 min)
- OR Discussion of self-compassion as an appreciative questioning exercise or speech-object exercise and optional self-compassion exercise(s) (see materials for meeting 3)
- Closing round (10 min)





## **Exercise:** **Appreciative asking**

*Duration approx. 45 min + unloading 20 min*

The exercise is based on the dialogue skills exercise described in the book “Verkostojen johtaminen” (Network Management) (Järvensivu 2019, pp. 195–197). The duration of the exercise is approx. 45 min + joint reflection 20 min.

This conversational exercise strengthens listening and understanding the other person’s point of view. This happens in groups of three in speaker, questioner and observer roles (if the groups are not even, the instructors can join the groups). There are three rounds so that the roles change, and everyone gets to be in all the roles (10 min talking, asking and observing, 5 min sharing observations, three rounds).

In a remote meeting, the groups meet, for example, in private rooms on Zoom.

### **Instructions for the speaker:**

- Think about the chosen theme; take your time and dare to think “out loud”. You can start with one of the help questions that set the groundwork for the theme, or you can speak freely.

### **Instructions for the questioner:**

- The questioner’s task is to listen attentively and be interested in the other person’s thinking, and to help the other person speak. Try to let go of what you think and instead try to get to know the other person’s thinking. Your job is to listen and ask appreciative, open-ended questions.

### **Observer:**

- Your task is to observe the conversation by listening quietly: how did the conversation feel? How did the listener/questioner act?

**Note!** Keep talking, asking, and observing throughout the allotted time, even if you feel that the matter is closed earlier. Something interesting may still emerge. After each round, a short breakdown is held with the small group, during which the observer first shares their observations of the discussion, and the questioner and speaker can also share their experiences of the roles in question.

Finally, a joint discussion with the whole group for approx. 20 min. Here the participants can tell in groups how the different roles felt and, possibly, what emerged from the theme in terms of content.



## **Exercise:** **Talking stick**

The exercise is based on the dialogue skills exercise described in the book “Verkostojen johtaminen”, (Network Management) (Järvensivu 2019, pp. 194–195).

**Background:** To meet another person compassionately, we need to be there for them and listen to them genuinely. Listening is often lacking in our interactions; We are too busy thinking about what we would say next and where we can bring our own thoughts in the discussion. This creates a way of doing things, where we don't really listen to the other person or are interested in their thoughts but listen to other people's thoughts only as inputs to what we think and want to say.

Hurry is an obstacle to compassion (Pessi 2017). We can also practice stepping out of the rush in our interactions. Stopping for a moment – even if only for a few minutes – to genuinely listen to the other person creates time and space for encounters. Stopping is an important skill of appreciative interaction and a prerequisite for compassion.

Stopping in a conversation means stopping the first reactions and calmly examining them instead of acting immediately on those reactions, for example, rushing to interrupt and comment on something that the other person has said.

To practice stopping, a "talking stick," can be used in conversation.

- Select an object that circulates from one speaker to another.
- They who hold the object speak, and the others listen in peace. Listeners don't have to be completely expressionless when listening, but they also don't have to constantly support the speaker with gestures and facial expressions. Silent, accepting listening is enough.
- It is often useful to start the exercise so that for at least one round the talking stick circulates in the ring in order. In this case, you must wait for your own speech in peace, and you cannot influence when you get the talking stick. In principle, speaking time is not limited, but it is a good idea to agree on a total speaking time for the round and indicate approximately how many minutes this is per speaker. This allows speakers to regulate the length of their speeches.
- After a round or two, the talking stick may be allowed to circulate freely within the time available, with the speaker handing it over to the next person who asks to speak. You can ask to speak, for example, by holding your hand slightly up.
- The facilitator gives instructions for the exercise and monitors the total use of time but does not give turns to speakers.
- Finally, we reflect together on what we learned from the exercise about stopping, listening and holding back reactions.

The exercise calms down the conversation, frees the speaker to listen and gives the speaker a calm space to express their thoughts even when they are a little uncertain or incomplete. This creates space for human encounters.

In a remote meeting, you can also practice the core idea of the talking stick exercise, stopping and holding back reactions, even though the physical object cannot circulate. The discussion can be carried out in rounds, where all participants speak in turn.

## References

- Isaacs, W. 2001. Dialogi ja yhdessä ajattelemisen taito. Helsinki: Kauppakaari.
- Järvensivu, T. Verkostojen johtaminen. Opi ja etene yhdessä. Helsinki: Books on Demand.
- Pessi, A.B. 2017. Mikä myötätuntoa estää työpaikkojen arjessa? In Pessi et al. (Eds.), Myötätunnon mullistava voima. Helsinki: PS-Kustannus.

## Themes

### COMPASSION AND WORKING LIFE

#### Questions for discussion:

- What thoughts do you have on the phrase compassion and working life?
- What is the effect of compassion on work?
- What does the future of working life look like, and what role could compassion play in it?

#### Thoughts for discussion:

- After entering working life, many of us spend half of our waking hours at work. Work is an arena into which the rest of life and the employee's emotions are inevitably reflected.
- Important questions include, for example, how does the work community deal with an employee who has been faced with, for example, the illness or death of a loved one or some other grief in their "private life"? Or an employee who has major responsibilities: for example, being a caregiver, or has a child with special needs?
- The significance of compassion in work organisations has been studied extensively, and compassion has been linked to many factors of individual well-being and to the better performance of the entire work community (see, for example Dutton et al. 2014).
- A compassionate and caring atmosphere increases helping and sharing information, which is important in work and all communities.
- Working life research talks about psychological safety, i.e., the shared experience that there is no fear of being embarrassed or punished in one's work community. Questions related to psychological safety include, for example, do I dare to open my mouth in a meeting and share my thoughts? Do I dare to ask "stupid questions"?
- With the digitalisation and automation of work, working life skills are undergoing a transformation. Work performed by people emphasises human interaction, work in teams, the meaningfulness of work and the fact that future work will increasingly require creative new solutions or new questions.



## COMPASSION AND FUTURE SKILLS

### Help questions for discussion:

- What thoughts do you have about the phrase “compassion” and the future?
- How does compassion relate to predicted global and societal trends?
- What does the future of working life look like, and what role could compassion play in it?

### Thoughts for discussion:

Compassion is noting, understanding, putting oneself in another’s shoes, wanting to reduce suffering and acting to reduce suffering. How compassion skills can, for example, deal with these trends (Sitra 2020):

- Climate change and related migrations
- Scarcity of resources, fair distribution of resources
- Multiculturalism
- Ageing
- Growing inequality
- The rise of populism
- Various social bubbles, us and them thinking, xenophobia

### Compassion as a future skill can also be considered through the transformation of work:

- With the digitalisation and automation of work, working life skills are undergoing a transformation. The work performed by people emphasises human interaction, work in teams, the meaningfulness of work and the fact that the work of the future will increasingly require the creative production of new solutions or new questions.

## COMPASSION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

### Help questions for discussion:

- What thoughts do you have on the relationship between compassion and social change?
- How can compassion drive us to act for social change and support us in doing so?
- How can self-compassion help in situations where we feel we are “part of the problem” (for example, because of our consumer behaviour or simply because we live in a society that operates in an ecologically unsustainable way)?

### Thoughts for discussion:

- Compassion – noticing suffering, wanting to alleviate suffering, and taking concrete action – is a powerful tool for social change. We notice social injustices that cause suffering, and we act to correct these grievances and help people. People working in social justice, human rights, democracy and environmental protection embody compassion that is channelled into action.
- Advocating for social change shows the firm and powerful side of compassion – compassion does not always appear gentle.
- The element of compassion, presence, helps us to listen better and understand people and things more deeply. Being present and stopping helps us to act more wisely; Understand the best way to act, instead of rushing.
- Compassion also helps to avoid “us and them” thinking, confrontations and demonization of the other side that sometimes come up in change work. A compassionate approach means looking at human actions from an attitude of understanding and looking at one’s own actions.



## Sequel to the theme of self-compassion

If the group so wishes, this time we can continue discussing self-compassion and doing self-compassion exercises instead of thematic discussions. Even then, part of the meeting can be used for discussion and you may utilise, for example, the talking stick exercise. In this case, the theme of the discussion can be, for example, “Self-compassion in studies”. Therefore, the guideline is to freely start developing common thinking through the thoughts that this combination of words brings to mind.

In addition, self-compassion exercises that were not yet performed at meeting 3 may be done.

### References: Compassion and working life

- Dutton, J. E., Workman, K. M., & Hardin, A. E. (2014). Compassion at work. *Annu. Rev. Organ. Psychol. Organ. Behav.*, 1(1), 277–304.
- Juntunen, E., A.B. Pessi, T. Aaltonen, F. Martela & T. Syrjänen (2017). Myötätunto ja merkityksellisyys töissä. In Pessi et al. (Eds.), *Myötätunnon mullistava voima*. Helsinki: PS-Kustannus.
- Pessi, A.B. & Martela, F. (2017). Myötätuntoista ihmistä ja työelämää etsimässä. In Pessi et al. (Eds.), *Myötätunnon mullistava voima*. Helsinki: PS-Kustannus.

### References: Compassion and future skills

- Juntunen, E., A.B. Pessi, T. Aaltonen, F. Martela & T. Syrjänen (2017). Myötätunto ja merkityksellisyys töissä. In Pessi et al. (Eds.), *Myötätunnon mullistava voima*. Helsinki: PS-Kustannus.
- Sitra (2020). *Megatrendit 2020*.

### References: Compassion and Social Change

- Jinpa, T. (2015) *A Fearless Heart*. London: Piatkus.
- Steidle, Gretchen (2016) *Conscious Social Change: Investing in Mindfulness for Fierce Compassion and Social Impact*. <https://skoll.org/2016/05/09/conscious-social-change-investing-in-mindfulness-for-fierce-compassion-and-social-impact>

## Meeting 6:

### Your own and others' unique strengths

In the last meeting, the skill of co-passion and appreciation of diversity are strengthened by getting to know character strengths. Let's also reserve time for a joint reflection on the compassion mentoring process that is now coming to an end as a group.

#### Program

- Opening round (10 min)
- Introduction to the theme of the day (5 min)
- Discussion task: Character strengths (60 min)
- Reflection on compassion mentoring (30 min)
- Possible agreement on further communication of the group
- Closing round (10 min)



### Discussion task: Character strengths

*Duration 60 min*

The purpose of the exercise is to help you value yourself, activate co-passion and appreciate the diversity of humanity.

Character strengths are qualities that feel like “yourself” and that you like to use. They manifest themselves, for example, in activities in which we easily immerse ourselves (flow state). VIA (Values in Action) is a character strength philosophy created in the early 2000s that has been studied extensively. The classification is based on six virtues, under which there are a total of 24 character strengths. (Vuorinen & Uusitalo-Malmivaara 2017) A more detailed list of character strengths can be found, for example, from [kaisavuorinen.com/uncategorized-fi/luontevahvuudet-jaoteltuina](https://kaisavuorinen.com/uncategorized-fi/luontevahvuudet-jaoteltuina) or [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org).

## Doing the exercise

Start with individual work: read through the list and think about what your strengths are. As an aid, you can use the so-called Strengths identifying questions: Which of these traits feel energizing and natural to you? Which of these do you often come up with? (10 min)

In a couple or a group of three: tell us what you identified as your strengths and, if desired, how you identified them. The task of your partner/other group members is to be interested in your strengths and reflect, for example, in which situations these strengths are especially needed, what special joy they bring to other people, or even tell if they have noticed that these strengths are manifesting in you. (3 x 7 min or 2 x 10 min, depending on the size of the small group.)

A joint short breakdown, couples/groups may bring up their insights if they wish. (10 min)

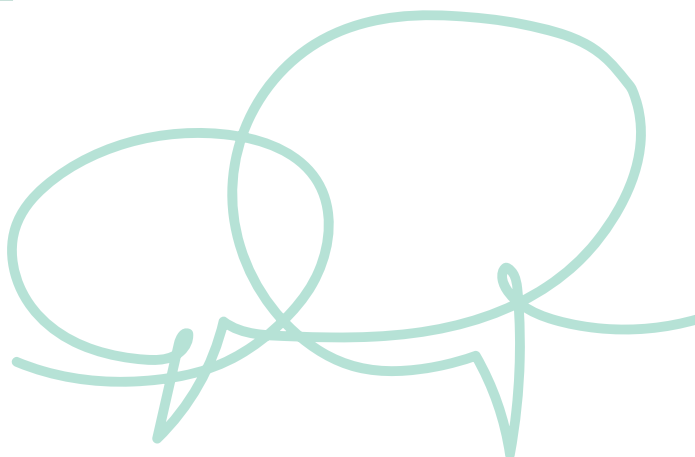
Back to individual work for a moment: Now think about someone who is very different from you, maybe even someone you are a little unfamiliar with. What are their strengths? What good do they bring to others through their strengths? Think to yourself first (5 min)

Back to couples/groups: discuss your thoughts (10 min.)

A short joint debriefing, couples/groups may bring up their insights if they wish. (10 min)

## References

- Vuorinen & Uusitalo-Malmivaara (2017) Huomaa hyvä! Näin ohjaat lasta ja nuorta löytämään luontevahvuutensa. Jyväskylä: PS-Kustannus.
- [Skoll | Conscious Social Change: Investing in Mindfulness for Fierce Compassion and Social Impact](#)



## Final reflection of compassion mentoring as a group

Finally, thoughts and experiences of compassion mentoring are discussed and collected alone and together.

Let's start by pondering alone for a moment:

- What has stood out about compassion or what insight is on my mind?
- How has compassion mentoring felt?
- Has compassion mentoring affected my everyday life in any way?
- What could I do to promote compassion in my life and in my study community?

Thoughts can be recorded on post-it notes and displayed (if desired) in the shared space. In a remote meeting, you can use, for example Padlet, where you can gather thoughts under headed columns.

Finally, one can freely unpack the results of individual reflections and discuss how one has experienced compassion mentoring. If desired, compassion mentors may also ask for feedback on the process and their own actions. What worked and what could still be developed?



05

Appendix





# 5 APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1. Invitation to mentors

### Compassion mentoring in student peer groups to begin

Do you want to be part of building a more humane learning community and creating positive encounters between people? Would you like to gain useful experience in small group facilitation?

Compassion mentoring in student peer groups is a model developed in Nyyti's Compassion in Higher Education project and will be launched in the near future at (*name of institution*). We are now looking for student mentors for compassion mentoring groups. The groups will meet (*date*), and the mentors will receive training (*date*).

The feedback on compassion mentoring groups has been positive. The groups have built a great atmosphere and helpful discussions and work on the theme of compassion. The fact that the groups are led by peer mentors – students from your own university or school – has been seen as a positive matter. The students who have acted as mentors have found facilitating the groups to be an empowering and rewarding experience, as well as a valuable exercise in view of their future working life.

The small groups meet about six times. The activities of the group include discussions and exercises on various compassion-related topics. The mentors work in pairs. As a mentor of a compassion mentoring group, you do not need to be an expert on the topic. Your role, together with your work pair, is to facilitate the group's shared effort and work on the topic. In addition to induction, mentors have your supervisor's support throughout the group process, and there are also opportunities for them to learn together and share their experiences with other mentors.

The mentors receive a certificate for their work, and may also apply for credits based on mentoring.

Want to know more? Contact (*contact details*) or express your interest in becoming a mentor by filling in this form (*link to registration form*). Applications will be processed on a first-come, first-served basis, and we will hold an initial interview with applicants so that we can get to know each other and discuss the mentor role in the compassion mentoring groups in more detail.



## APPENDIX 2. Invitation to groups

### **Wellbeing and meaningful encounters - sign up for the (spring/autumn ) compassion mentoring groups**

How could we bring more humanity into our hectic and draining daily lives?

How can we encounter each other in a genuine, caring and supportive way, and to promote this approach throughout our learning community?  
How can we be kinder to ourselves?

We welcome you to discuss these and many other issues related to compassion in the Compassion Mentoring Group. The highly popular compassion mentoring group for the students of (*the name of the university*), will restart on (*date*). The groups are peer groups for students to meet in a safe and welcoming space and explore together the opportunities and challenges of compassion and self-compassion, and to strengthen our collective capacity for compassionate attitudes and actions.

Group activities include discussions and exercises on compassion-related topics, compassionate interaction and self-compassion, among other things. The group also gives you the opportunity to meet other students interested in the subject. The groups are led by trained students from your university.

The groups meet (*place*). Each group will meet six times in the next academic term.

Find out when the groups meet and sign up by using this form (*link*).

Register early to avoid disappointment! Groups are filled on a first-come, first-served basis. Further information: (*contact information*)

The groups are provided by (*organisation*) and was originally developed by Nyyti's Compassion for Higher Education project.



## APPENDIX 3. Examples of structures for the induction of compassion mentors

### First induction session: an introduction to compassion

- Total duration approx. 3.5 hrs
- Some of the exercises can be led by one of the mentor trainees. In this case, agree well in advance with the trainee about this.

### Programme for the induction session:

- Welcoming words, description of the day's objectives and programme; health and safety practicalities, breaks, etc. (10 min)
- Ice-breaker exercises of your choice, for example by discussing in pairs and introducing the pair to the group (see [chapter 3](#) for tips for group formation) (20 min)
- Agreeing on group rules (see Chapter 3) (20–30 min)
- Break (10 min)
- Discussion: What does the word compassion bring to mind? (see [Chapter 4](#), Session 1) (25 min)
  - Discussion in pairs or small groups, answers on post-it notes, etc.
  - Pairs share their ideas with others together
  - Joint discussion/comments on the ideas raised
- Short lecture/presentation on compassion, reflecting on the ideas raised in the previous exercise + questions (20 min). The lecture should draw on the theoretical background of the different session introduces in [chapter 4](#), especially for session 1.
  - In this context, it can also be said that the areas of compassion listed by Pess and Martela (2017) (see chapter 2) form the backbone of compassion mentoring and the meetings are built around these ideas.
- Break (10 min)
- Kindness meditation (10 min) (see [chapter 4](#) of the handbook, materials for the session 1)
- Exercise in appreciative inquiry (see [chapter 4](#), materials for the session 5) in groups of 2 x 3 (approx. 60 min with instructions and debriefing). The theme of the exercise can be, for example

- What things influence compassion? In what situations do I find it easy or difficult to be compassionate?
- A compassionate encounter or an encounter where there was no compassion. The speaker recalls and describes such a situation and the listener asks questions to deepen their understanding of what the other person is describing.

**To conclude, a short debriefing:**

How did the exercise feel methodologically? How did it feel to listen appreciatively and ask questions? How did it feel to talk to an appreciative listener?

- Possible practical issues on compassion mentoring 10–15 min
- Final feedback round 10 mins
- Short round of feedback, for example in writing so that participants write their thoughts anonymously on a piece of paper and return it to the supervisors
  - What did I learn?
  - What was useful?
  - What needs more work?
  - How did you feel about work today?

**Homework for next time:**

Consider in advance and be prepared to discuss the following questions:

- Think of a (small) group experience that was successful. What factors do you think contributed to the success? What did the facilitator do right?
- What about an unsuccessful group experience? What factors made it unsuccessful? How did the facilitator conduct themselves?
- What do you find comfortable/enjoyable/easy about the upcoming compassion mentoring group?
- What are the issues you are concerned about or what do you think will be challenging in facilitating a Compassion Mentoring Group?

*Ståhlberg 2017; Vehviläinen 2014*

## The second induction: group facilitation


Duration approx. 3.5 hrs

- Start of the session and initial feelings round, explaining the purpose of the initial feelings and the feedback rounds (15 min)
- Discussing the homework in groups/pairs, for example as station work where groups go around writing answers to homework questions on large pieces of paper (each station has one of the four homework questions) (30 min)
- Discussion and exercises related to group facilitation
  - Reflection on the role of the peer mentor in pairs/small groups and joint summary (15–20 min) (see also [chapter 3](#)). As supporting questions, you might ask:
    - What does the peer mentor do (the core task)?
    - What does the peer mentor not do (where are the boundaries of the role; where does the mentor feel comfortable drawing the line)?
    - What can a peer mentor do if they wish (in addition to their core task)?
    - What does a peer mentor not do under any circumstances (unethical conduct)?
  - (Break 10 min)
  - Discussion facilitation, different ways of organising discussions that are inclusive and reinforcing of a sense of security. Strengthening a safe atmosphere in the group. Think of ideas and share positive experiences together and compile a list of the results. (15 mins) (see also [chapter 3](#))
  - Difficult situations and compassionate ways of dealing with them. (20 mins). As a collective discussion: what are the difficult situations that can arise in compassion mentoring? Compile these for display, for example, on a projected slide. Common discussion: How can we respond to these situations with compassion and, if necessary, firmness?
- A chat with your future mentoring pair (15 min). Questions e.g.
  - What are my expectations and needs? How would I like to plan and run the group sessions? How and what kind of feedback would I like on my work?
  - How can we create a safe atmosphere in our group sessions?
- Thoughts on how we deal with difficult situations?
- (Break 10 min)

- Possible practicalities
- Discussion exercise: Pausing and listening with a talking object (for instructions, see [chapter 4](#) of the Handbook, exercises for session 5). The topic of the exercise could be, for example, "Compassion in higher education" and the task could be to think freely together about this topic by using a talking object. (50 min)
- A final feedback or reflection by "marking the moment". Here, participants physically go to the spot in the room where they had a particular insight during their orientation and share this insight with the group. (10 min)
- Feedback

### **Third induction: testing the exercises**

- Start, initial feelings round (10–15 min)
- Review the objectives of compassion mentoring, i.e. what compassion skills are practised in the groups in the different sessions, go through the framework of the group sessions (see [chapter 4](#)) (15 min)
- Discuss how to structure and plan group sessions; make it known that facilitators are free to emphasise areas that are of interest to themselves and the group (10 min)
- Familiarisation with exercises and testing them together. Induction trainees can also agree in advance to lead exercises during this induction session, so that they can practise first-hand.
- Final feedback round + how do I feel about starting my journey as a mentor (10 min)
- Feedback



## APPENDIX 4. Examples of structures for the mid-term and final meetings with the other compassion mentors

### Mid-term session

Duration about 3,5 h; to be organised after a few mentoring group meetings have already taken place

- Welcoming words, the programme of the session 5 min
- Initial feelings round? 10 min
- Fishbowl discussion: Experiences with the group (2 x 3 people, 2x20 min + approx. 15 min debriefing). Here, a small group of people sit in the middle of the room in a "fishbowl" sharing experiences with each other, while others listen quietly around them. This not only makes it easier for participants to have space to talk and ask each other questions, but also allows everyone else to hear the experience, rather than being divided into small groups to talk at the same time. You can choose one of the mentoring pairs from each group at a time, so that you can immediately hear the experiences of the different groups. For example, you can use the following as supporting questions in the fishbowl discussion.
  - What do I want to tell you about my group?
  - How have I felt about facilitating this group?
  - What has been surprising?
- When sharing experiences, it is important to remember to maintain confidentiality, i.e. to talk about things at a general level and not on a personal level identifying specific participants. Finally, we will discuss together what was heard in the fishbowl discussion and what themes could be brought up for further discussion at the day's meeting. If necessary, you can vote on the themes to be discussed.
- Break
- Individual reflection and free writing on selected topics (10-15 min)
- Working together on the themes (60-75 min), for example
  - discussion and writing on large sheets of paper, keeping to the same groups as the fishbowl discussion, approx. 10 min + short debriefing. Various ideas inspired by the theme are listed on the large pieces of paper, including how to approach it, tips on what you could try as a facilitator.
  - Large group discussion, using a talking object (in free order)
  - role-playing of challenging group situations (with sufficient anonymity) and joint discussion of the thoughts raised

- Your strengths as a group facilitator, working in pairs (15–20 min). List 3–5 of your own strengths as a group facilitator, and 3–5 of the strengths of your pair. Remember that strengths come in many different shapes and forms. Finally, share what was listed and discuss.
- Final round
- Feedback

## **Final session**

### **Duration approx. 3 hrs**

- Welcoming words, the programme of the session (5 min)
- A round-up of feedback on the day + main thoughts about your mentoring group and the group's shared journey (20 min)
- Presentation of the feedback received from the participants of the compassion mentoring group (15 min)
- Reflection on the group process – Start by reflecting on the questions independently, you can take notes (15 min) Questions (to be displayed on a slide or flipchart)
  - Looking back, what does the group's journey look like now?  
How would I describe my mentoring group's shared journey?
  - Reflecting on the themes of the mid-term meeting: what were the themes or challenges identified back then? How has the situation evolved, how have we addressed potential challenges and with what results?
  - Where did my mentoring pair and I succeed?
  - What would I do differently if I were to lead the group now?
  - Did you and your mentoring pair develop any good mentoring practices that you would recommend to others?
- Break (10–15 mins)
- Reflection on the group process continues: Discussions in two groups, with each mentoring pair splitting into different groups. Induction supervisors join the groups and act as scribes (30 min)
- Short joint debriefing (10 min)



- Exercise: looking back. Reflect quietly to yourself on your feelings and thoughts when you signed up to be a compassion mentor, when you walked through the door for your first induction session, and when you first saw your own compassion mentoring group. Silent reflection and finally a joint debriefing, so that those who wish can bring up any thoughts that have emerged from this revision. (10–15 min in total)
- Break (5 mins)
- Reflection on your own learning as a group facilitator (25 min)  
For example, writing on post it notes (at the end the notes are collected and presented together followed by a discussion).  
Possible questions:
  - What did I learn about facilitating a group?
  - What did I learn about myself as a group facilitator?
  - What lessons do I want to take away from this for my future work, studies or life?
- Final round: How am I feeling + what do I want to say to this team? (15 min)



## APPENDIX 5. Registration form

### Registration for compassion mentoring groups

Compassion Peer Mentoring for students at (*name of university*) will take place on (*date*) The groups will meet six times, about once a week, usually on the same day and time each week. Group sessions are held at (*where*). Below you can find the meeting times of the groups and you can choose the most suitable group for you.

The registration is binding. If you have to cancel your participation, please let us know as soon as possible (*contact person*) and we will make your place available to someone else. Occasional absences can be reported to your group mentor.

#### Sign up to a group

- Group 1 (*meeting times listed*)
- Group 2
- Group 3

**Name**

**Email**

**Faculty and year**

**Possible points for organisers to consider**

*Description of the processing of personal data + consent*



## APPENDIX 6. Initial questionnaire

### Questionnaire

The responses to the questionnaire will be used to ...*(describe the purpose, such as the planning and development of activities, research or communication purposes)*. Responses are collected and processed anonymously.

*Consent to the use of the responses as described above*

- Background information
- Faculty
- Stage in studies
- (gender)

1. What does the word compassion mean to you?
2. What impact do you think compassion for others can have in a student's life and in the learning community?
3. What significance do you think self-compassion can have on a student's life and the learning community?
4. What are you hoping for from compassion mentoring?
5. How did you hear about compassion mentoring?  
(select one or more options)

06

Tips

# 6 Further reading

## Books

- Gilbert, P. (2015). *Myötätuntoinen mieli – uusi näkökulma arjen haasteisiin*. Helsinki: Basam Books.
- Grandell, R. (2015) *Itsemyötätunto*. Helsinki: Tammi.
- Grandell, R. (2018) *Irti itsekritiikistä*. Helsinki: Tammi.
- Jinpa, T. (2015) *A Fearless Heart*. London: Piatkus.
- Kallio, M. (2016) *Lujasti lempeä*. Helsinki: WSOY.  
-> see also [maaretkallio.com](http://maaretkallio.com).
- Kallio, M. (2017) *Inhimillisiä kohtaamisia*. WSOY.
- Neff, K. (2016). *Itsemyötätunto. Luovu itsesi soimaamisesta ja löydä itsevarmuutesi*. Helsinki: Basam Books.
- Pessi, A. B., Martela, M. J. S., & Paakkanen, M. A. (2017). *Myötätunnon mullistava voima*. Jyväskylä: PS-Kustannus.
- Seppälä, E. M., Simon-Thomas, E., Brown, S. L., Worline, M. C., Cameron, C. D., & Doty, J. R. (Eds.). (2017). *The Oxford handbook of compassion science*. Oxford University Press.

→ if you are interested in scientific research on compassion, the table of contents of this book will give you a good idea of the main researchers and research topics in the field.

## Blogs and websites

- [self-compassion.org](https://self-compassion.org) (Kristin Neff's website)
- [copassion.fi/category/blogi](https://copassion.fi/category/blogi)
- [ccare.stanford.edu/blog](https://ccare.stanford.edu/blog)

## Videos and podcasts

- [ccare.stanford.edu/video](https://ccare.stanford.edu/video)
- Hanne Savunen's mindfulness and self-compassion exercises:  
[www.youtube.com/channel/UCOqpY58vkcmLPEr8GMyqkuA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOqpY58vkcmLPEr8GMyqkuA)
- Joan Halifax: Compassion and the true meaning of empathy, video:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmWcU7UQuB8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmWcU7UQuB8).  
A longer version: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQijrruP9c4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQijrruP9c4)
- Joan Halifax: Compassion as the radicalism of our time:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yvt00QHb5GQ&t=4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yvt00QHb5GQ&t=4s)
- Chris Germer's thoughts about self-compassion:  
[podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-scientific-case-for-self-compassion-chris-germer/id1087147821?i=1000503857766](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-scientific-case-for-self-compassion-chris-germer/id1087147821?i=1000503857766)
- Ten Percent Happier -podcast: [www.tenpercent.com/podcast](https://www.tenpercent.com/podcast).  
Podcast featuring leading compassion researchers.



There is evidence of compassion as a community resource and a force for change in the world of work and in higher education. Compassion is known to contribute not only to mental wellbeing and academic success, but also to a sense of belonging and meaning.

Compassion peer mentoring is a model developed by the Compassion in Higher Education project in cooperation with the University of Jyväskylä to support the strengthening of a compassionate and supportive culture in higher education. The positive results of the compassion mentoring pilots in terms of strengthening compassion skills and the sense of belonging to a group make this a promising approach to be adopted throughout the higher education sector.

This handbook serves as a practical guide to organising compassion mentoring in your own university, both for the university staff organising the activities and for the students acting as peer mentors in the compassion mentoring groups.

For more information about our project, please visit:

[www.nyyti.fi/en/projects/  
the-compassion-in-higher-education-project](http://www.nyyti.fi/en/projects/the-compassion-in-higher-education-project)



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