

Compassionate Letter Writing

Thank you for downloading this free e-resource. Within this document you will find: -

- an introduction to the concept of self-compassion
- guidance on how to write a compassionate letter to yourself
- a full example of a letter for inspiration



Introduction

WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION?

The easiest way to learn about the concept of self-compassion is to first think about the meaning of compassion. When we show compassion to other people we exert warmth, love, kindness, empathy and genuine care. Many people are superb at doing this! Yet when it comes to ourselves, often people find it difficult to generate compassionate feelings towards themselves. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, most of us are not taught or brought up to practice and develop self-compassion. Secondly, we are programmed to react very quickly in response to negativity or stress and this can override our 'soothing system'. More on that later...

Therefore, self-compassion means....

*showing compassion to one's self
when feeling inadequate, feeling like a failure
or when we are suffering*

One of the pioneering researchers working in this area, Dr Kristin Neff, describes three main elements of self-compassion: -

1) Self-kindness

Showing warmth and understanding to what we are going through. Embracing our pain and acknowledging our difficulties and not ignoring them. Accepting our feelings with empathy and kindness.

2) Common humanity

Recognising the fact that all humans suffer and that we are not alone. Feeling inadequate or not good enough is part of this process.

3) Mindfulness

Taking a balanced approach to managing our emotions. Not suppressing our feelings, and not over-exaggerating them either, just being with them, in the moment. Observing our thoughts and how they affect our feelings and adopting a non-judgemental attitude towards ourselves.

WHY SHOULD WE PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION?

If we start to adopt a self-compassionate nature and engage in mindfulness activities, we will start to notice change. These changes can vary from person to person, but mostly come in the form of increases or improvements in: -

Resilience: this is our own ability in being able to cope with things that come upon us. The better we can cope, the less we will succumb to the stresses of life and respond to them differently. In a slower and more accommodating manner.

Happiness: it can affect the level of contentedness that we experience on a day to day basis. Self-compassion can allow us to feel connected to ourselves and to others enhancing our social and romantic relationships. We can start to feel happy with what we have, and with our experiences, moment by moment.

Health: soothing ourselves in this way has so many health benefits. We can reduce our perception of physical pain, cope with chronic illnesses better, which can help us manage symptoms better. It can protect us against developing mental health problems or reduce our anxieties.

Self-esteem: by accepting who we are and gently moving away from listening to our inner critic, we can start to feel more positive and confident in ourselves. Allowing ourselves to move forward and finding out what we are 'made for'.

Others: there are many other benefits to developing our levels of self-compassion, such as improving concentration and performance in or out of work.

HOW DO WE KNOW THIS?

Over the past 20 years many psychologists, researchers, neuroscientists and more, have been researching the concept of self-compassion and the effect it may have on the human body and brain.

Links have been established between practicing self-compassion and changes in our brain chemistry. Scientific research has shown that by generating compassionate feelings towards ourselves, we can reduce the influx of certain stress hormones such as cortisol. And of course, by doing this we are gently changing our biological reaction to things like stress and worry.

Another example involves research into 'touch' and the effect this has on our bodies. We already know that cuddling with a loved one or a pet generates feelings of warmth and contentedness. The same feelings can be formed when we make a physical gesture of warmth and care towards ourselves. Again, physical touch reduces cortisol but also increases more of our happy hormones, namely oxytocin.

HOW CAN WE DEVELOP SELF-COMPASSION?

There are so many ways to get started on working on increasing our levels of self-compassion. Below are just a few suggestions. In this e-resource, we will show you how to use letter writing as a way of building resilience, feeling happier and healthier, increasing self-esteem and confidence.

Keeping a gratitude journal

Making daily affirmations

Mindful meditation exercises

Doing good deeds

Self-reflection

Relaxation/self-care

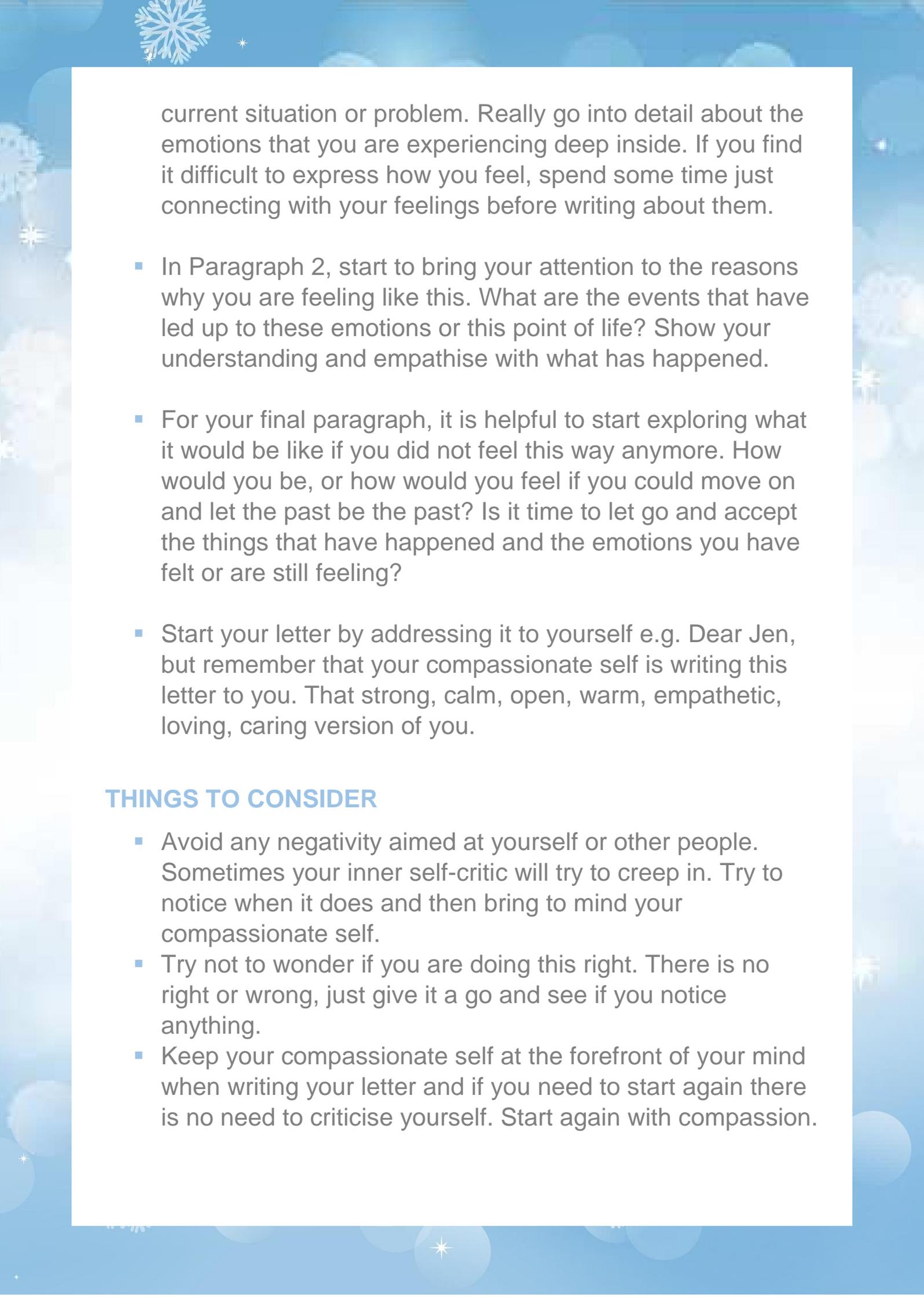
Letter

PREPARATION

- It always helps to prepare for writing your letter by inspiring yourself into 'compassion mode'. You can do this by spending a little time beforehand engaging in a short meditation such as the one below.
- Find a quiet place alone where you can sit comfortably for 10 minutes and gently close your eyes. Start to try to imagine another version of you looking towards yourself, reaching one arm out to you, as if you could take their hand. This other version of you is your compassionate side, your friend to be called upon when needed. They look like you, act like you, they are you. Now start to imagine how the compassionate version of you feels towards you. Are they emanating warmth? Are they smiling? Are they holding your hand? Are they calm? Are they wise? Are they strong? Can they empathise with how you are feeling? Just spend a few minutes imagining this compassionate version of you, allowing yourself to become aware of how they are feeling towards you.
- Now you are ready to begin your letter, ensure you allow yourself enough time to complete a whole letter. An hour should be enough.

GENERAL NOTES ON STRUCTURE

- How long your letter is, is entirely up to you. For your first letter, it might be helpful to stick to three separate paragraphs.
- In Paragraph 1 describe what you are feeling about your



current situation or problem. Really go into detail about the emotions that you are experiencing deep inside. If you find it difficult to express how you feel, spend some time just connecting with your feelings before writing about them.

- In Paragraph 2, start to bring your attention to the reasons why you are feeling like this. What are the events that have led up to these emotions or this point of life? Show your understanding and empathise with what has happened.
- For your final paragraph, it is helpful to start exploring what it would be like if you did not feel this way anymore. How would you be, or how would you feel if you could move on and let the past be the past? Is it time to let go and accept the things that have happened and the emotions you have felt or are still feeling?
- Start your letter by addressing it to yourself e.g. Dear Jen, but remember that your compassionate self is writing this letter to you. That strong, calm, open, warm, empathetic, loving, caring version of you.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Avoid any negativity aimed at yourself or other people. Sometimes your inner self-critic will try to creep in. Try to notice when it does and then bring to mind your compassionate self.
- Try not to wonder if you are doing this right. There is no right or wrong, just give it a go and see if you notice anything.
- Keep your compassionate self at the forefront of your mind when writing your letter and if you need to start again there is no need to criticise yourself. Start again with compassion.

An Example

Dear Katie,

My gosh! You have had a hard time of it recently. It's no wonder that you've been feeling down all the time, and lost. You were very angry at first, I know, it must have been months when that started to subside. And then you were left...feeling very unlike the woman that you used to be. You felt like you were living within a completely different world to everyone else, a lonely world. A place where you couldn't talk to people about your emotions. A place where you couldn't express how you felt inside your heart. You felt broken. You started to enjoy things less and less, and enjoy being around people. I know that you love your husband deep down but you have been finding it so hard to show your love. And feel his love too. It's like you are shut off from each other. You haven't smiled much recently or belly laughed like you used to do. I know you are not finding things very funny at the moment. You feel a loss. A loss for the person you were before having a baby. You are grieving almost and that makes your sadness continue. Don't get me wrong, you have enjoyed being a mum, but let's have a look at what happened to you Katie.

It's really no wonder why you now feel the way you do. You suffered a huge trauma. Something bigger than anything you have had to face before. In the labour room when your daughter was stuck inside your body, and when everything turned suddenly from excitement to fear...you became frightened and very confused. The whole scenario played out very quickly and you had no time to think. You were not in control. You panicked. After your daughter eventually came into the world, you were left traumatised. Yet had to concentrate immediately on the survival of your daughter, breast-feeding her and comforting her when she was

screaming. You were paralysed from the waist down and unable to move from the hospital bed for half a day and that scared you too. Unbeknownst to you at the time, you had gone into shock and you stayed like that for days, even when you left the hospital days later. You couldn't walk properly or sit down comfortably for about two months and the pain that you felt was excruciating. Trying your best at being a new mum, in severe pain, breastfeeding twenty-four seven and getting little to no sleep. Katie – it's no wonder you were angry and feeling hurt. It's also no surprise that you didn't feel like you had bonded with your baby. It's no wonder that you cried almost every single day and that you questioned yourself about being a mum. It's no wonder you kept it all inside and hidden as much as you could. I know you were concerned what other people would think.

In fact, I know you know a lot of things about what happened to you and why you feel the way you do. You...after all... are the expert on yourself. But I will challenge you now Katie, in the most loving way I can. I'm going to give you everything I've got now to pull you out of the place you are and gently push you through to the place you long to be....to that happier, funnier, loving world you are reaching for. So just answer me this question, Katie...

...Are you ready...?

Are you ready to let this go?

Can you accept that this has happened to you and move on? I personally do not want to see you this unhappy any longer. I believe eighteen months of anger, hurt and sadness is enough. It's time Katie. Time to love, time to heal, time to laugh, time to enjoy life...again. You may never completely be the person who you were before...and you don't need to be.

Accept a new version of you. Accept what happened to you.
Accept the feelings you have had.

Accept it all. And let it go.

Always remember, I am here for you if you ever need me again.

Love from,

Katie

your compassionate self

Do you accept?

Yes I accept

