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Chapter 1

Introducing Compassion Focused Therapy

People are more similar than different. We're all born into a set of circumstances that we don't choose, and in possession of a phenomenal yet very tricky brain. We're all trying to get by, doing the best we can. The sooner we wake up to this reality the better.

Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) is here to help. This approach aims to liberate you from shame and self-criticism, replacing these feelings with more helpful ways of relating to yourself. It helps you to choose the type of person you want to be and to develop ways to make this choice a reality.

In this chapter, I introduce you to CFT, offering you an understanding of how it works and helping you to understand the benefits. I also point out the steps you may take along the way as you work with the information in this book. Finally, I take a moment to help you connect to the wider community around you as you begin this journey.



REMEMBER

CFT advocates that you don't rush to 'learn' about the approach but instead allow space to experience and 'feel' it. So take your time with this book as you apply it to your life, and really discover the benefits.

Getting to Grips with Compassion Focused Therapy

CFT was founded by UK clinical psychologist Paul Gilbert, OBE. The name of the approach was chosen to represent three important aspects:

- » **Compassion**, in its simplest yet potentially most powerful definition, involves a sensitivity to our own, and other people's, distress, *plus* a motivation to prevent or alleviate this distress. As such, it has two vital components. One involves engaging with suffering while the other involves doing something about it. Chapter 2 delves into the ins and outs of compassion in more detail.
- » **Focused** means that we actively develop and apply compassion *to* ourselves. It also involves accepting and experiencing compassion *from* and *for* others.
- » **Therapy** is a term to describe the processes and techniques used to address an issue or difficulty.



REMEMBER

CFT looks to social, developmental and evolutionary psychology and neuroscience to help us understand how our minds develop and work, and the problems we encounter. This scientific understanding (of ourselves and others) calls into question our experiences of shame and self-criticism and helps us to develop the motivation to make helpful changes in our lives.

CFT utilises a range of Eastern and Western methods to enhance our wellbeing. Attention training, mindfulness and imagery combine with techniques used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), and Person Centred, Gestalt and Narrative therapies (to name but a few), resulting in a powerful mix of strategies that can help you become the version of yourself you wish to be.



TIP

CFT is often referred to as part of a 'third-wave' of cognitive behavioural therapy because it incorporates a number of CBT techniques. However, CFT derives from an evolutionary model (which you find out more about in Chapters 3, 4 and 5) and it uses techniques from many other therapies that have been found to be of benefit. As such, CFT builds upon and integrates with other therapies. As therapies become more rooted in science, we may see increasing overlap rather than diversification.



REMEMBER

Compassion can involve kindness and warmth, but it also takes strength and courage to engage with suffering and to do something about it. CFT is by no means the easy or ‘fluffy’ option. Head to Chapter 6 to address some of the myths associated with compassion.

You may be reading this book because you want to find out more about this form of therapy. Alternatively, you may want to develop your compassionate mind and compassionate self out of care for your own wellbeing. The *why* or your *motivation* for reading this book has a big effect on the experience and, potentially, the outcome. Personally, I hope that whatever your motivation, you consider applying the approach to yourself in order that you can learn it ‘from the inside out’.

Defining common terms

You may find that some of the terms used in CFT are new to you. Here are a few common terms that I use throughout this book, along with an explanation of what they mean:

- » **Common humanity:** This refers to the fact that, as human beings, we all face difficulties and struggles. We’re more alike than different, and this realisation brings with it a sense of belonging to the human family.
- » **Tricky brain:** Our highly complex brains can cause us problems. For example, our capacity to think about the future and the past makes us prone to worry and rumination, while our inbuilt tendency to work out our place in a hierarchy can have a huge impact on our mood and self-esteem. In CFT, we use the term *tricky brain* to recognise our brain’s complexity and the problems this complexity can lead to. We consider our tricky brain in more detail in Chapter 3.
- » **Compassionate mind:** This is simply an aspect of our mind. It comes with a set of attributes and skills that are useful for us to cultivate (I introduce these attributes and skills in Chapter 2). This frame of mind is highly important for our wellbeing, relationships and communities. But just as we have a compassionate mind, we also have a competitive and threat-focused mind – which is highly useful, if not a necessity, at certain times (Chapter 4 takes a look at our threat-focused mind).
- » **Compassionate mind training:** This describes specific activities designed to develop compassionate attributes and skills, particularly those that influence and help us to regulate emotions. Attention training and mindfulness are used as a means to prepare us for this work, and we look at these practices in Part 3.
- » **Compassionate self:** This is the embodiment of your compassionate mind. It’s a whole mind and body experience. Your compassionate self incorporates your compassionate mind but also moves and interacts with the world.



TIP



REMEMBER

» **Compassionate self cultivation:** Your compassionate self is an identity that you can embody, cultivate and enhance. Compassionate self cultivation describes the range of activities that help you develop your compassionate self. Head to Chapter 10 for more on the cultivation of your compassionate self.

Engagement in the compassionate mind training and compassionate self cultivation activities provided in this book is often referred to as 'physiotherapy for the brain', as their use has been found to literally change the brain!

Compassionate mind training and compassionate self cultivation are integral to CFT, but there's so much more to CFT. For many, getting to a point at which you can see the relevance and benefits of compassionate mind training and compassionate self cultivation, and overcome blocks and barriers to compassion, is the most significant aspect of your compassionate journey.

» **Exercises:** These are activities for you to try. Sometimes they help to illustrate a point or provide a useful insight. Other exercises can give you an idea of what helps you to develop and maintain your compassionate mind.

» **Practice:** Once you're aware of which exercises are helpful to you, you can then incorporate these into your everyday life. Regular use of these exercises becomes your *practice*.

Observing the origins of CFT

CFT is closely tied to advances in our understanding of the mind and, because scientific advances never stop, the therapy continues to adapt and change based upon it. Much of this book focuses on sharing the science to help develop a compassionate understanding of yourself and a sense of connection with fellow travellers on this mortal coil.

CFT is also born out of a number of clinical observations:

» **People demonstrating high levels of shame and self-criticism often struggle with standard psychological therapies.** For example, using CBT, many find that they're not reassured by the generation or discovery of alternative beliefs and views and that this doesn't result in changes to the way they feel. Individuals may say 'Logically, I know I'm not bad/not to blame, but I still feel it' and 'I know it's unlikely that things will go wrong, but I still feel terrible'.

» **What we say to ourselves is important, but *how* we say it is even more important.** Ever called yourself 'idiot' in a light-hearted and jovial manner?



TIP

You probably did so without feeling any negative effects. But, have you ever called yourself an idiot in a harsh and judgemental manner? You probably felt much worse on that occasion, perhaps resulting in an urge to withdraw or isolate yourself.

Consider phrases such as, 'look on the bright side' or 'count your blessings'. Sometimes these phrases can be said in a life-affirming way, but using a condescending, frustrated or angry tone represents a whole different ball game. This helps illustrate that your emotional tone is important.

- » **Therapy can result in improvement in mood, self-esteem, sense of control and achievement, alongside a reduction in difficulties. However, life events can trigger relapse.** How we relate to ourselves, especially when life doesn't go the way we hope, is pivotal to our ongoing wellbeing.
- » **Post therapy, many people report that they never disclosed to their therapist the things that caused them the most distress.** This resulted from their sense of shame and the way they believed others (the therapist) would feel about them. In addition to this, consider how many people simply don't seek help at all because they fear what others think.
- » **People struggle to feel loved, valued, safe or content if they've never experienced these feelings.** For some people, these feelings are alien concepts and, most of all, alien experiences, difficult to generate by discussion alone. As such, it's important to develop the emotional resources and skills to deal with difficult emotions without turning to alcohol, food, drugs, work, excessive exercise or particular fixations.
- » **Most of us struggle with emotions such as anger, anxiety and vulnerability, but many also find positive emotions extremely difficult, even frightening.** For some people, care, kindness, love and intimacy are terrifying, and to be avoided. People experiencing depression often worry that something bad will happen when their mood lifts. Likewise, feelings of connection and trust often stir up feelings of isolation and rejection, and a fear of loss. These difficulties can interfere with the goals we set ourselves unless we address them.



TIP

CFT is an accumulation of years of research, clinical insights and teachings drawn from a broad range of areas. Much of this research and study is summarised and published in scientific papers, textbooks and self-help books by Paul Gilbert and colleagues. A number of websites also provide additional resources. You can find details of these in the Appendix. This book provides you with a starting point for your CFT journey and offers a framework upon which you can hang your future CFT practice – use these resources to develop your practice further.



TAKING A COMPASSIONATELY THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

It has long been established that compassionate, respectful and supportive relationships are key to our wellbeing and integral to effective psychotherapies. A key goal of many therapies is the development of a better relationship with yourself. However, different therapies place emphasis on different methods to account for and produce change, for example:

- *CBT* focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviours and helps you generate new thoughts and behaviours in order to change your feelings.
- *Interpersonal therapy* focuses on your relationships and how they affect you.
- *Psychodynamic therapy* aims to bring the unconscious mind into consciousness, helping you to experience and understand your true feelings in order to resolve them.

In contrast, CFT begins with your experience of compassion from your therapist (in person or through books like this one). This relationship with your therapist is pivotal. It then focuses on the personal development and cultivation of compassion to help you to make beneficial choices for yourself and for others.

With this in mind, this book contains quite a bit of me – as an author, as a psychologist and, most of all, as a human being who struggles too. I hope that the bits of me enhance your experience of reading the words I have chosen to write for you.

Making the Case for Compassion

If we view compassion as ‘a sensitivity to our own and other people’s distress *plus* a motivation to prevent or alleviate it’, we can easily appreciate the many individual, group and societal benefits to developing and maintaining compassion in our lives. It makes intuitive sense and it’s the reason why compassion has been a central component of many religious and spiritual traditions across the centuries.

Research studies support the benefits of bringing compassion into your life. Higher levels of compassion are associated with fewer psychological difficulties. Compassion enhances our social relationships and emotional wellbeing: it alters our neurophysiology in a positive way and can even strengthen our immune systems. Research also suggests that CFT can be successfully used to address difficulties associated with eating, trauma, mood and psychosis.

SO I'LL NEVER FEEL BAD AGAIN?

CFT won't rid you of life's difficulties. You won't find yourself day after day serenely swanning around, impervious to life's difficulties.

We practise compassion *because* life is hard. Compassion can assist us to make helpful choices and, when ready, create a space in which we can work through strong emotions, and grieve for things we've lost and wish had been different. With compassion, we relate to our anger, anxiety and sadness with kindness, warmth and non-judgement. This allows us to consider the reasons such emotions are there, work through them and face the issues they are alerting us to.

The development and cultivation of compassion isn't a quick fix. It's a way of living our lives.

However, for me, you can observe the power of the CFT approach in training clinicians. As they discover this approach to help their clients, they often report that the application of CFT in their personal lives can be transformative, leading many clinicians to develop and maintain their own personal practice.



I believe that personal practice is vital for any clinician. I attribute much of my wellbeing and my ability to engage with other people's suffering to the application of this approach in my life.

Understanding the Effects of Shame and Self-Criticism

Shame and self-criticism are common blocks to wellbeing, and CFT is designed to overcome them. The following sections help you consider how shame and self-criticism can affect you and what you can do to address and overcome these issues.

The isolating nature of shame

Shame is an excruciatingly difficult psychological state. The term comes from the Indo-European word 'sham' meaning 'to hide', and, as such, the experience of shame is isolating. When we feel shame, we feel bad about ourselves. We believe others judge us as inadequate, inferior or incompetent.

The next exercise helps you to explore the nature of shame and how it may affect you. Begin by finding a place you can sit for a short time that is free of distractions. Allow yourself to settle for a few moments. It may help to lower your gaze or close your eyes during the exercise.

- 1. Bring to mind a time when you felt ashamed (nothing too distressing, but something you feel okay to revisit briefly).** Allow the experience to occupy your mind for a few moments.
- 2. Slowly ask yourself the following questions, allowing time after each question to properly explore your experience:**
 - How (and where) does shame feel as a sensation in your body?
 - What thoughts go through your mind about yourself?
 - What do you think other people thought/would think or make of you if they knew this about you?
 - What emotions do you feel?
 - What does it make you want to do?
- 3. Allow the experience to fade from your mind's eye. Recall a time you've felt content or happy, perhaps on your own or with someone else, and let this memory fill your mind and body.**

Depending upon the situation you brought to mind, a sense of anxiety, disgust or anger may have come to the fore. You may feel exposed, flawed, inadequate, disconnected or bad. Maybe you experience the urge to curl up, hide or run away, or perhaps feelings of anger and injustice leave you with the urge to defend yourself or confront someone.

Often, shame results in a feeling of disconnection. We don't like ourselves (or a part of ourselves) and we don't want to experience closeness to others because this may result in rejection. Our head goes down and we want to creep away. In addition, shame can affect our bodily sensations, maybe leading to tension, nausea or hotness. When you combine these negative views of yourself with predicted negative views from others, you create a very difficult concoction of experiences.



REMEMBER

Shame brings with it a range of difficult experiences. Strong physical sensations, thoughts and images are just some of them. Emotions such as anxiety, sadness and anger can race through you as you feel the urge to withdraw, isolate or defend yourself.

Some of the things we feel shame about include:

- » Our body (for example, its shape, or our facial features, hair or skin)

- » Our body in action (for example, when sweating, urinating, defecating, burping, shaking, walking or running)
- » Our health (for example, illnesses, infections, diseases or genetic conditions)
- » Our mind (for example, our thoughts, including any intrusive images in our heads, our impulses, forgetfulness and our psychological health)
- » Our emotions (for example, anxiety, anger, disgust, sadness, jealousy or envy)
- » Our behaviour (for example, things we've said and the way we've said them, our use of alcohol and drugs, our compulsions, our eating patterns, or our tendency to avoid other people)
- » Our environment (for example, our house, neighbourhood, car or bedroom)
- » Other people (for example, our friends, family, cultural or religious group, or community)

Exploring why we feel shame

Human beings are social animals and need the protection, kindness and caring of others. Our brains are social organs. We like to feel valued, accepted and wanted by those around us in order to feel safe. There's no shame in this. These needs represent a deep-rooted part of us that's been highly significant in our evolution and survival.

Shame begins in how you feel you live in the mind of another – and it is a social regulator. In other words, we're programmed to try to work out, 'What are they thinking about or feeling toward me?', 'Do they like me?' and 'Who can I trust?' Just to add a further layer of complexity, we also try to work out, 'Do I like myself or this aspect of me?' and 'Can I trust myself?'



REMEMBER

If we perceive rejection from our social group or reject an aspect of ourselves, shame can be the result. Although difficult to experience, shame can trigger us to make helpful changes and others to come to our aid in order to soothe the difficulties we experience.

But what happens if we feel shame about things we are unable to change (such as our appearance, an aspect of our personality or our culture)? What happens if shame is attached to historical events that we blame ourselves for and can do nothing about? What happens when nobody comes to our assistance or we're unable to accept the help offered to us?

Unfortunately, we can find ourselves 'stuck' in shame. We may withdraw and isolate ourselves (physically, emotionally or mentally), predicting rejection from others and often rejecting aspects of ourselves. Alternatively, our experience of

shame may lead to over-striving, perfectionism and ‘image management’, whereby we ‘hide’ aspects of ourselves. As social beings, this is a very difficult and precarious place to be.



Perpetual image management is like building a house with no foundations: you may achieve great things, but you attribute them not to yourself but to other factors. It’s like living with the perpetual threat of your house falling down!

Similarly, over-striving and perfectionism are all well and good *if* we have the time and energy *and* we can achieve our goals. We feel good and experience a buzz of achievement. However, over a sustained period we can become exhausted and vulnerable to difficulties if we fail to meet our goals or high standards. When this happens we can easily revert back to the experience of shame because underneath our striving and perfectionism is a deep-seated feeling of inadequacy and shame.

Although internal and external shame often come hand in hand, there may be times when you experience them independently (see the nearby sidebar, ‘The different types of shame’). For example, you may feel no internal shame about a physical health condition or your body in action, but you may experience external shame if you perceive others feel differently toward you. Alternatively, you may feel internal shame due to an experience of abuse, despite knowing that nobody judges or feels negative things toward you for it.

Beginning to address shame

If the exercise in the earlier section, ‘The isolating nature of shame’, put you in touch with how shame may affect you, it may be helpful to consider another scenario. The following exercise helps you consider if self-acceptance (which can follow from addressing your experience of shame) may be helpful to you.

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF SHAME

You can experience different kinds of shame:

- *Internal shame* results from what we feel about ourselves.
- *External shame* relates to what we think others feel about us.
- *Reflected shame* is what we experience as a result of other people’s actions. For example, we may feel shame on behalf of a friend or relative. Alternatively, we may feel shame due to the actions of our cultural or religious group or country.

Imagine that you understand and accept yourself, warts and all, with kindness. Imagine you have the confidence to let the key people in your life truly know you. Imagine also that you're able to discard your image management and show vulnerability; give people the opportunity to connect with you, idiosyncrasies and imperfections included; and allow people to get to know you as a whole. Consider what that would be like. Would it be something you'd want to work towards?

If the answer is yes, this is the book for you. Chapter by chapter, exercise by exercise, we'll work towards this aim together.

CFT helps us overcome our experience of shame and then develop self-acceptance. From a place of inner stability, we can begin to relate to ourselves with kindness and encouragement and become better able to look outwards and interact with the world.



REMEMBER

We begin to develop our compassionate mind by seeing ourselves and others in the flow of life and understanding the challenges presented by our tricky brains, our bodies and our social environment (see Chapters 3–5 for more on understanding ourselves). This helps to create the foundation for letting go of shame. We then develop our compassionate self, practice compassion for and from others, and work on our self-compassion to help us further (see Chapters 10–12 for more). This 'flow' of compassion is an important overarching theme that runs throughout this book.

CONFUSING SHAME WITH OTHER CHALLENGING EMOTIONS

Many people use the terms shame, embarrassment, guilt and humiliation interchangeably. Although each is associated with self-conscious feelings, they're very different. To understand these differences, here they are in a nutshell:

- We feel *guilt* when we believe we've done something wrong and feel we need to make amends. Guilt is linked to caring and, as long as it's not misplaced (such as feeling guilty for something that's not our responsibility), it can be a good thing for ourselves, other people and society.
- *Humiliation* brings with it feelings of anger that we've been placed in such a position by someone. We may feel the urge to retaliate to gain back power and control.
- *Embarrassment* happens when we feel judged negatively, but we don't believe the incident sums us up. For example, you may have tripped up in the street, gone out with food in your hair or come back from the toilet with your skirt in your knickers or your flies undone! Any of these sound familiar? We often laugh with others about things that are embarrassing, and this can be a positive, connecting experience.

The burden of self-criticism

Self-criticism is the critical way we talk to ourselves and is associated with emotions such as anger, disappointment and frustration. Relating to ourselves in such a way increases our risk of experiencing a range of psychological problems. Self-criticism has also been found to maintain them. Research suggests that self-critical people may do less well in therapy and experience poorer physical health and relationships.

Self-criticism can take a number of forms. For some, it comes with feelings of inadequacy; for others, self-hatred. Needless to say, whatever form self-criticism takes, addressing the problem is worthwhile.

Becoming familiar with your self-critic

Self-criticism highlights two aspects of ourselves. Our *self-critic* is the part of us that says all those horrible things in our heads (or sometimes out loud!). On the receiving end of the abuse is our *criticised self*.

The following exercise looks to increase your awareness of your self-critic and how it affects you. Begin by finding a place you can sit for a short time that is free from distractions. Allow yourself to settle for a few moments. It may help to lower your gaze or close your eyes during the exercise.

- 1. Think back to a recent occasion when you were critical of yourself (nothing too distressing, but something you feel okay to revisit briefly).** It may be something difficult at work, or maybe you lost something or made a mistake.
- 2. See the situation in your mind's eye once more. Imagine seeing your self-critic. Ask yourself the following questions:**
 - What does your self-critic look like?
 - What kind of facial expression does it have?
 - What size is it, relative to you?
 - What is its tone of voice?
 - What is its posture like?
 - Is it making any particular movements?
 - What emotions is it directing your way?
 - Does it remind you of anyone?
- 3. Allow the experience to fade from your mind's eye. Now recall a time when you've felt content or happy and let this memory fill your mind and body.**

When we look properly at our self-critic, we often find it's associated with feelings of frustration, contempt, disapproval and anger. It may loom large or take the form of a little gremlin that wags its finger in disapproval. Its tone of voice is hostile, aggressive, patronising or condescending. It can evoke memories from the past, of a person (or people) who was (or continues to be) critical of you and your efforts.

Understanding why we criticise ourselves

What purpose do you think your self-critic serves? Maybe you think it can help you in some way? The following exercise explores this question in more detail.

For a moment, imagine that you take a magic pill and, as a result, you're never going to be self-critical again.

- » What do you think your greatest fear may be?
- » What do you think may happen if you let your self-critic go?

When I conduct this exercise in workshops, it's hard to keep up with the fears shouted out by the audience. Here are the top five answers (but there are many more!):

- » I'll be lazy and I won't get things done
- » I'll become self-absorbed and egotistical
- » I'll make mistakes
- » I won't improve my life or learn anything new
- » People won't like me

As you can see, your self-critic is more than just a finger-wagging gremlin designed to give you a hard time! On the one hand, we know that self-criticism isn't good for our wellbeing and is linked to a number of problems . . . But on the other hand, we think it helps us get things done, makes us a nice person and stops us making mistakes!

We're born without shoes on our feet (thankfully, say all the mothers in chorus!). But most of us consider that shoes are a necessity and therefore wear them. We're also born with a tendency to look out for danger and to signal threats by shouting. Unfortunately, we do this to ourselves in all manner of ways, from calling ourselves an idiot when we've lost our keys (my favourite pastime) to calling ourselves fat when we look in a mirror. Developing your compassionate mind and compassionate self is like putting your shoes on. It supports and helps you navigate the difficulties that life puts in your way.



REMEMBER

Just because we're born like this, it doesn't mean that we need to live our lives like it. With an awareness of what helps us (and what doesn't) we can consciously choose a different way of relating to ourselves. Your self-critic is likely to leave you feeling bullied, down and anxious, while your compassionate self provides you with the strength and courage to face difficult situations and move in a more helpful direction.

Beginning to overcome self-criticism

The exercises in the previous two sections may have illustrated the bullying nature of your self-critic, but they may also have highlighted potential concerns that you may have about letting go of your self-critic.

This next exercise helps you to explore what is motivating your self-critic.

Think back to the situation in which you were self-critical that you identified in the earlier section, 'Becoming familiar with your self-critic':

- » What did your self-critic want?
- » What's underneath its anger, disapproval or disappointment?
- » Is it going about things the right way?

You may discover that your self-critic has your best interests at heart, but it's going about things the wrong way. As such, you may find that it's unhelpful to battle with or respond to your self-critic; instead, it may be helpful to try to develop an alternative way to achieve the things you want to achieve in your life. This is at the heart of CFT. We build a compassionate relationship with ourselves (and with our self-critic too!).



TIP

Certain experiences can lead us to believe we deserve punishment, and this may lie behind self-criticism and self-attacking. For example, children are sometimes told that they have something wrong with them, or they hold themselves responsible for things that aren't their fault. This can make it hard for them to develop self-compassion. Chapters 6 and 7 explore some of the barriers that you may encounter as you develop your compassionate mind and compassionate self. Alternatively, if you think that this is a problem for you, consider speaking to a professional who can assist you in your efforts.

The following exercise helps you to consider whether self-criticism or self-compassion acts as a better guide for you in your life.

Imagine a child for whom you care greatly. It's your first visit to their new school and you go for a meeting with the head teacher. 'There are two classes for each age

group,' she says, 'why don't you go and speak to each teacher and observe a bit of their lessons before deciding which class you want your child to join?'

You meet the first teacher. They tell you that they're going to do their best to help your child reach their potential. With a stern voice she says, 'Children improve by the speed at which I correct their mistakes; I use the tone of my voice and tell them off, in no uncertain terms. I often have them sit at the front of the class so that they learn not to repeat their mistakes. I'll find the best strategy to use for your child.'

As the teacher relays this information, a child spills a drink across the table and on the floor. Immediately, the teacher shouts, 'Be careful! Clean up that mess and don't be so clumsy again!' To reinforce this message, the child is told to stand up for the rest of the lesson. The teacher whispers in your ear, 'If they learn that bad things happen after they've made a mistake, they quickly learn not to make them.'

Having said your goodbyes, you enter the other class. The second teacher tells you that they too wish your child to reach their potential. With a warm voice, she says, 'It's very important for children to profit by their mistakes, be open about them, curious about how they came about, and learn to prevent them in the future.'

As you're speaking, a child's knife and fork clatter to the floor. 'Just a moment,' the teacher says to you. As she squats down next to the child, she gently enquires, 'What happened?'

The child replies, 'I was getting my drink and my elbow caught my knife, and that caught my fork, and . . .'. The teacher responds, 'Okay, we need to give this some time and thought, because this keeps happening, doesn't it. How about we have a chat about it?' And so the conversation between child and teacher continues for a little while and in a gentle manner.

Which teacher would you choose for your child?

If the answer is the second teacher, pause for a moment and consider why you're always sending yourself to the first teacher – a critic?



TIP

Learning from your mistakes is very important, but you have a much better chance of doing this, and doing it in a sustainable way, if you encourage yourself with kindness, warmth and non-judgement rather than undermining yourself with self-criticism, frustration and contempt. I'm not sure about you, but if I was a child faced with the first teacher I'd be more likely to deny it was me, blame someone else or wet myself!

In case you're thinking that the antidote to self-criticism is always to be soft and gentle, it may help to consider a different scenario.

Imagine you're a firefighter going into a burning building. What kind of person would you like to give you cover and support as you go? Someone who says with strength and support, 'I've got your back, you can do this' or someone who shouts 'Get in there!' and is quick to criticise if things don't go to plan?

Both people probably lead you to do your job with the same urgency, adrenaline racing through your body, but with the first you're likely to feel supported and part of a team. With the second, you're more likely to feel on your own, with even higher levels of anxiety.



TIP

When things get tough, we need a friend by our side. Someone with our best interests at heart, who is warm, non-judgemental, honest and supportive. We'd look for these qualities in someone else, so why not in ourselves? This is the essence of CFT.



REMEMBER

Someone who truly has your best interests at heart, and is able to act on them, won't just say 'there, there, never mind' if you need to address or confront something. But neither will they beat you up like your self-critic is prone to do. They'll help you reflect, see things from a different perspective and make changes.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN SELF-CRITICISM AND COMPASSIONATE REFLECTION

Here are some of the ways self-criticism can differ from compassionate reflection:

Self-criticism	Compassionate reflection
Backward-looking	Forward-looking
Angry and hostile	Warm and non-judgemental
Telling yourself off	Considering personal growth
Punishing and condemning	Encouraging and supportive
Labelling/name calling	Provides perspective
Evokes fear and anxiety, or overwhelms	Evokes excitement and positivity
Increases avoidance and withdrawal	Increases engagement with life's challenges

Although it can seem as if our self-critic has our best interests at heart, it actually stimulates difficult emotions over and over again. In Chapter 4, you find out about how self-criticism can trigger your threat system.

A NOTE TO OTHER CFT THERAPISTS

Imagine a surgeon getting ready to operate. They'll make sure that the instruments they use are the best they can be. This involves preparation and sterilisation.

Many of us use our minds and bodies to help those in need, and so it's important to make sure that the instruments we use are the best they can be too. As therapists, we need to look after ourselves, developing and maintaining our compassionate minds and compassionate selves to do this work. It's helpful to use practices throughout the day to refresh and replenish ourselves so that we can be the best we can be.

In the following exercise, you contemplate living in a mind that's not condemning and critical but that's instead supportive of you and your efforts.

Imagine what would happen if you committed yourself to generating a friendly voice in your head that is always supportive and forward-looking. A voice that can quieten your self-critic, is strong and instils courage in you for facing life's difficulties. Would this be a worthwhile endeavour?

Saying goodbye to self-criticism doesn't mean that you never reflect on your thoughts, emotions and actions. Instead, you discover how to reflect compassionately on your life and your experiences. Check out the nearby sidebar 'Distinguishing between self-criticism and compassionate reflection' for more on the differences between the two.

Using CFT to address shame and self-criticism

Shame and self-criticism are associated with difficult psychological experiences. They can leave us feeling low, anxious, disconnected and sapped of energy. Shame and self-criticism can result when we act in response to a threat (see Chapter 4 for more), which can cause us considerable problems.



REMEMBER

CFT therefore helps us understand ourselves in order to address shame and self-criticism. CFT develops our compassionate mind, recruiting our full brain potential (instead of just our threat system) and our compassionate self in order to relate to ourselves and the world around us in a more helpful and meaningful way. This is beneficial for our own wellbeing and that of others.

Identifying the Steps Involved

CFT begins with discovering more about ourselves, our amazing capacities and the challenges we face. This understanding starts at an intellectual level but, by allowing space for it to ‘sink in’, we also experience it at a profound emotional level. These experiences help us to address our tendency for shame and self-criticism. They also help us to make sense of difficulties we may experience with emotions, behaviours, thoughts and relationships. Parts 1 and 2 of this book focus on understanding the challenges we face in our lives, and understanding ourselves and how we can work to manage these challenges.

As we begin to understand ourselves better, we start to realise the choices we have. Who do we want to be? Which parts of us do we want to nurture? We become aware of the commitment that making changes requires and develop the motivation to make these changes.

If we’re motivated to develop and cultivate our compassionate self, we can use a whole range of practices to help us improve our wellbeing. Parts 3 and 4 delve deeper into CFT, introducing further compassionate practices and offering guidance on widening our experience of compassion.

Connecting with Compassion

Although we’re each unique, we’re actually more similar than we realise, and we share a common humanity: we’re all trying to get by in life, as best we can. With this in mind, we look at a simple exercise that can help to connect you with the wider CFT community.

Close your eyes or lower your gaze, and for a few minutes simply bring your awareness to all the other people who have read or are reading this book. Consider that they, like you, are trying to discover information and practices that may be of benefit to themselves and others. Experience a sense of connection with them.

Bring your attention to me, as I write these words, and my own journey through life’s struggles and amazing experiences. Move on to consider those individuals who haven’t come across CFT as yet, but who you hope will gain benefit from experiencing compassion in their lives.

Simply sit with this sense of common humanity and, over the coming weeks, months and years, continue to connect with it.