

The Five Hindrances

There are 5 states of mind that everyone encounters on the path to self-compassion that interfere with the practice. It helps to notice when they occur, perhaps by the visceral discomfort they engender, and to gently and acceptingly give them a name.

Grasping

We instinctively *grasp* for pleasure and for things that we hope will give us pleasure. We also *cling* to what we're already enjoying and feel sad when it ends. Grasping and clinging are similar expressions of desire. The Buddha said that desire is like taking out a loan; it's repaid by loss and separation when the pleasure is used up. Desire *per se* is not the problem; it's when we become a slave to our desires that we experience unhappiness. We need to hold our desires lightly.

We should be especially wary of becoming too attached to the good feelings that will arise during self-compassion practice. If you cling to love and happiness, your practice will become more frustrating than uplifting. Good feelings will arise and disappear as night follows day. An antidote to the hindrance of clinging to pleasurable feelings is to return to the practice of cultivating good will for yourself in spite of how you feel. When you're disappointed, exercise self-compassion *because* you feel disappointed.

Aversion

Other words for aversion are “avoidance,” “resistance,” “entanglement,” “disgust,” and “resentment.” Aversion is what we instinctively feel toward disturbing feelings. The Buddha called aversion a “sickness” because it ruins our health, and the antidote he prescribed was loving-kindness.

When aversion is directed toward ourselves, we lose the ability to comfort and forgive ourselves for our mistakes. Sharon Salzberg suggests that we look at anger and aversion from the perspective of a Martian who's seeing them for the first time. “What is *this*?!” Curiosity is the first stage toward overcoming aversion. The same is true for the shameful and unlovely parts of ourselves. Self-kindness gives us the chance to learn more about what's bothering us and, ultimately, to release it.

Weariness

This obstacle is also known as “dullness of mind,” “mental inertia,” “sloth,” “torpor,” and “boredom”—lack of interest in the practice of self-compassion. The opposite of weariness is the sense of delight that a child feels when encountering a fascinating object for the first time.

Is it possible to keep self-compassion practice as interesting as when you first felt it's true promise? This is not difficult to do—just remember *why* you started to practice. And don't make it a chore! If it isn't pleasant and unburdening, it's not self-compassion!

When you sit, see if you can really, REALLY, let yourself be happy and free from suffering. When discomfort arises, meet it with love and awareness and let it go. If you have a metta practice, savor the true meaning of the words and remind yourself of the target of the practice: yourself. Give yourself the experience of love and compassion however it comes most easily to you. Few of us can resist the attractive power of true love.

Weariness can descend upon the practitioner when the practice becomes too repetitive. Consider yourself like a captain on rough seas, always needing to make a course correction. Stay alert to the conditions that arise in each successive moment and make the most of them. You'll get bored and have a rougher ride if you switch to autopilot.

Agitation

Agitation is also known as “restlessness,” “remorse,” or “anxiety.” It refers to dissatisfaction with the way things are and the need to move on...somewhere, anywhere. The Buddha called agitation a tyrannical boss who's never satisfied. Regret over the past or worry about the future keeps the practitioner perpetually agitated.

Agitation can be quelled by appreciating the present moment. Rather than daydreaming about the future, we can reanchor ourselves in the present moment by labeling exactly what we're feeling—“urgency,” “restlessness,” “anxiety”—and by softening into the physical experience of agitation. Restless legs? Clenched teeth? Deeper feelings may emerge when we don't react to restlessness, such as fear of being forgotten or left behind. And the agitated heart will rest when it feels truly loved.

Doubt

Doubt to skepticism about the practice or one's ability to succeed at it. When the mind is doubting, it isn't experiencing compassion or loving-kindness. Much time and energy are wasted in doubt. The Buddha said doubt was like being lost in a desert.

Try keeping a self-compassion journal. Have you had moments of unexpected happiness since beginning self-compassion practice? Has your inner dialogue become more benign? Are you becoming more sympathetic to the plight of others? Have old relationship conflicts begun to ease up? Another way to overcome doubt is to talk with a teacher or practice in the company of others.