

# Enhancing a Positive School Climate with Compassion and Analytical Selective-Focus Skills (COMPASS)

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## Abstract

Educators everywhere experience challenges in maintaining a positive school environment. A single bully can produce a climate of fear, enlisting peers to target other students for harassment and intimidation. The victims of bullying often report feelings of fear, depression and a lowering of self-esteem, which can result in health issues, suicidal ideation, and poor school performance. Those who engage in bullying disrupt the learning environment, challenge administrators and teachers, and lose the opportunity to learn and grow emotionally. In worse case scenarios, tragedies have ensued from bullying and the hostile environment it creates. To combat this problem, some states have passed anti-bullying laws and administrators attempt to punish offenders, but these are all reactive approaches to the issue. COMPASS offers a pro-social approach to bully prevention by training children in compassion and kindness, offering step-by-step exercises for developing compassionate feelings and insight. Students who learn to care about each other are less likely to bully each other, and in addition, a more compassionate student body can create a positive school climate. The procedures, rationale, and results of a pilot program of COMPASS have been included. The pilot was undertaken in order to determine whether compassion can be taught in a classroom setting and in a secularized format that is acceptable to diverse student populations. It is the intention of the author that this article be used as a manual by teachers for enhancing student compassion and thereby reducing bullying via transforming school climate.

**Keywords:** compassion, insight, mindfulness, positive school climate, anti-bullying, strategies, modules

## 1. Introduction

*Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive.*

*~the Dalai Lama*

Compassion and a clear mind are crucial for optimal human functioning—individually, societally, and globally. Positive emotions like compassion and kindness promote academic and social success, shape robust neural functioning, and enhance physical and mental health.<sup>ii</sup> In contrast, we can see daily news of the devastation caused by individuals under the sway of narcissism, anger, greed, and other darker human emotions. Research is emerging on the ability to enhance compassion and other positive emotional states through mental training.<sup>iii</sup> This has implications for educational institutions as well as for broader society. Secularized programs promoting compassion and other positive mental states can provide common ground for people across beliefs, races, and social-economic divides, contributing to a more stable and decent society in which to live. More specifically, compassion training offers public education institutions a much needed anti-bullying strategy with a positive approach to cultivating a safe and supportive school climate. Behaviorally-based anti-bullying approaches are crucial, but they can be thwarted by negative school climate, especially when bullies dominate the social process and intimidate their victims into silence. In order to counteract such trends, compassion training can be a useful addition, providing pro-social norms and a systematic approach to cultivating compassion. With enough student buy-in, it could have a warming effect on school climate and thereby marginalize bullies and their followers while promoting a culture of tolerance and consideration. The approach to compassion training described in this article has been tailored for diverse audiences. It outlines steps for building a compassionate emotional stance through exercises designed to focus the mind on selected topics of contemplation. These cognitive exercises can lead to shifts in thought and mood, culminating in enhanced compassionate insight. The more students are exposed to such ideas and exercises, the more likelihood that conflict in peer relationships can be reduced and eventually replaced by interactions based on mutual respect and consideration. Students who learn to care for each other are less likely to accept or engage in bullying behavior.

## 2. The COMPASS Approach

COMPASS stands for Compassion and Analytical Selective-focus Skills. Selective-focus skills constitute an emerging discipline within cognitive-behavioral therapies and can be used to shape thoughts and moods (Lyubomirsky et al, 2013). Current research shows that, when we repeatedly focus our attention on something, corresponding neurological changes can be seen (Tang & Posner, 2013). Our focus and the corresponding

activities we perform cause clusters of neurons to be activated into functioning. It seems that our brains adapt to facilitate our development of new skills and activities. This is called "neuro-plasticity" and is observable through construction of new and strengthened neural pathways as "neurons that fire together wire together." Additionally, by repeatedly focusing our attention on a topic, we can strengthen corresponding ways of thinking and feeling.

The most studied selective-focus technique is called "mindfulness," which has been shown to develop the pre-frontal cortex, an area of the brain associated with emotional regulation and concentration (e.g., Davidson, et al 2003). Indeed, mindfulness is now a standard cognitive behavioral approach used by psychotherapists for alleviating and preventing depression, anxiety, and other mental difficulties (e.g., Cayoun, 2011). Many school systems are incorporating mindfulness programs as a standard part of their curriculum. Mindfulness serves as the foundation for the COMPASS "core skills," which suggest topics of focus aimed at reducing counterproductive mental states while enhancing compassionate insight.

These core skills are drawn from Tibetan Mind Training texts.<sup>iv</sup> However, any cultural and/or religious content has been eliminated in order to make them accessible to people of any belief system and they have been adapted here for a diverse audience in order to facilitate their use in a wide variety of settings. Some reasons for using the Tibetan traditions of mental development include that they are:

1. Particularly well thought out in their sequence and logic;
2. Easily secularized and adaptable for diverse audiences;
3. Being empirically studied at Emory<sup>v</sup> and Stanford<sup>vi</sup> Universities with emerging data supporting their effectiveness for generating compassion.

These skills contain a systematic approach in which one skill provides a foundation for the next. For example, the first core skill is equanimity, which aims at producing a feeling of equality towards everyone and thus reducing bias. Such an emotional stance allows the following skill of cultivating gratitude to be more universal in its focus. Gratitude helps to overcome feelings of inadequacy and neediness, which make it difficult to consider the needs of others. Thus it opens the way for the next skill of cultivating kindness: wishing others to be happy. Kindness then serves as an antidote to resentment, which can prevent compassion.

This series of contemplations prepare one's mind for cultivating feelings of compassion. Compassion can then be strengthened by an exercise called "giving and taking," a skill that helps to reduce self-preoccupation and to enhance resilience, courage, and fortitude. As compassion increases, it can then be activated and goal-directed. The final core skills of COMPASS employ analysis in order to develop insight. Compassion guided by insight is the overall goal of these exercises. Minds imbued with compassionate insight are useful to individuals as well as to broader society. The exercises for these selective focus skills have been put into easy-to-follow modules.

Also, an addendum has been added with simplified versions of each topic for use with younger children.

The COMPASS modules were developed over time in interactions with many clients within a clinical setting. Aspects of the various modules were selectively applied depending on client need. They were readily accepted by clients and used effectively by them, leading regularly to positive outcomes.

In addition, these modules in their entirety have been used in a diverse classroom setting with 23 first year social work graduate students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The students voluntarily agreed to answer pre and post questionnaires about their personal reactions, thoughts, and feelings to each module as well as to their overall impressions about the COMPASS approach. The exercises took about 15 minutes apiece, performed at the beginning of each class period. Their reactions were anonymously garnered and are included here throughout the presentation of the skills as *Pilot Group Feedback*.

*Pilot Group Feedback:* Near the end of the semester, after the students had experienced all of the exercises described below, they were asked whether or not the modules seemed applicable to culturally diverse audiences. Everyone responded yes, and some added supportive comments like "Yes, the exercises and visualizations seem to tap into universally human experiences." And "I've loved participating in these exercises. I look forward to this before every class and it has helped my stress levels and self-care." No respondents mentioned discomfort with the exercises.

### 3. Foundation Skills: Mindfulness and Stress Management

*"Between stimulus and response there is space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom." – Viktor E. Frankl*



Diagram courtesy of Mindful Schools ([www.mindfulschools.org](http://www.mindfulschools.org)). vii

Stated simply, mindfulness is a skill to help focus and calm the mind. Mindfulness training has been linked to reduced negative rumination, improved working memory, stress reduction, enhanced focus of attention, reduced emotional reactivity, better self-observation and insight, enhanced relationship satisfaction, fear modulation, improved processing speed, as well as numerous health benefits (see Davis and Hayes, 2012). People with mindfulness training display decreased anxiety and depression (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2012). Regular mindfulness meditation practice can help reverse heart disease, reduce pain, and enhance the body's immune system (Barbar, 2001). Research confirming the many benefits of mindfulness meditation continues to grow. In particular, meditation has been linked to increased compassion (Condon, et al, 2013).

Mindfulness is used as a foundation for the other COMPASS skills in order provide a calm state of mind as a basis for the ensuing contemplations. If mental distraction, worry and distress can start to settle, contemplation of the topics leading to compassionate states of mind can progress with more ease and efficiency. It is usually from a state of well-being and self-compassion that one is most able to consider the well-being of others (Neff and Germer, 2013). In addition to self-compassion, it is important to engage in self-care through working with one's various mental states in a discerning way. There are similes that can be helpful in preparing to work with one's mind:

*Like a garden:* Just as a garden can be overrun with weeds or beautified by flowers, our minds can be burdened by afflicted states or uplifted by positive states. We can become a gardener for our inner mental garden by repeatedly remembering, focusing, and identifying with positive states of mind. We can weed out a disturbing mental state by moving our attention off of it, focusing on something positive, and allowing the disturbing state to dissolve/fade away. Also, seeing through faulty concepts that underlie troubling mental states can help them fade.

Sometimes it can help to list various states of mind while asking oneself whether each mental state, if cultivated, would bring more inner happiness or sorrow. These various mental states can then be considered as "weeds" or "flowers" in respect to one's inner garden. For example, typical responses from clients interviewed about this are:

*Weeds (mental factors bringing more sorrow):*

Anger  
Craving  
Fear/worry/stress

*Flowers (mental factors bringing happiness):*

Loving kindness  
Contentment  
Courage/confidence/calm

It is interesting to note that these intuitively derived categories correspond to research on the health effects of various mental states. For example, high levels of anger have been linked to heart disease, and chronic stress compromises the immune system (Latham 1999, Krantz et al. 2011). We can also see the addictions brought on by excessive craving and the interpersonal conflicts caused by anger. Positive mental states, in contrast, are linked with better health outcomes and positive interpersonal interactions.

*Like the sky:* The simile of the mind being like the sky helps in identifying how various mental states can course through our mental awareness without being permanent, just like clouds float through the sky but do not change the sky's nature. No matter how stormy our thoughts and feeling might become, we can remain confident that the clarity of our mental awareness, just like a clear sky, is there undisturbed. Therefore, we can eventually return to the present moment and cultivate a calm, focused mindfulness.

*Main mindfulness practice:* Mindfulness contains three specific skills: focus of attention, recalling the object of one's focus, and preserving/heightening awareness. Traditionally, there are four objects one selects for one's focus: body, feelings, awareness, and the objects of one's awareness. All of these are simply accomplished by bringing one's focus to the breath as it leaves and returns from and to one's nostrils. An example on how to practice a session of basic mindfulness follows.

#### *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness Practice*

1. Mindfulness of body:
  - Begin by noticing your breath as it leaves your nostrils and returns, noticing if it's a short breath or a long breath.
  - Be aware of your whole body as you breathe.
  - Breathe in calm and breathe out stress.
  - Let your body start to calm and settle.
2. Mindfulness of feelings:
  - As you notice your breath, also notice your feelings.
  - Be aware of the present moment as you breathe.
  - Breathe in joy and breathe out your sorrow.
  - Let your feelings start to settle.
3. Mindfulness of awareness:
  - As you notice your breath, also notice your awareness.
  - Focus your awareness on the present moment.
  - Notice the clear nature of your awareness, freeing it from worries.
  - Concentrate your awareness on your breath.
4. Mindfulness of mental objects:
  - As you focus on your breath, notice thoughts come and go.
  - Notice the changing and impermanent nature of thoughts.
  - Let disturbing thoughts and feelings fade away.
  - Let go of thoughts and return your focus to your breath.

It is important not to try to stop thoughts. Thoughts will come and go whatever you do. Instead, focus on the breath and present moment, letting thoughts fade into the background for now. It is natural that thoughts will distract your mind. When distracted, simply return to focus on your breath. The practice of the four foundations of mindfulness should only take a few minutes, no more than five at first. It is vital to keep sessions short and sweet, so that you are willing to return to the practice again and again.

*Pilot Group Feedback:* 17 out of 18 respondents reported a drop in feelings of stress after being guided in a session of mindfulness. 14 out of 20 reported a drop in depression and discouragement when a mindfulness session was combined with an affirming visualization.

#### **4. Core Compassion Skills**

*Our task must be to free ourselves...by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty.*

*~Albert Einstein*

The core compassion skills target specific mental states for reduction and others for enhancement. Each skill module starts with a rationale in order to help convey its importance, which is followed by a brief session of mindfulness in order to prepare for the actual skill set. There will be three steps for conveying each skill:

- A. Briefly scanning previous units of instruction
- B. A narrative introducing the new skill
- C. Focusing the mind on the mental state generated by the narrative

It is important to note that the core skills take time and repetition in order to produce a lasting impact. Therefore, as with mindfulness practice, it is good to keep the practice sessions short, simple, and clear in order to encourage repeated practice.

#### 4.1 Equanimity Core Skill Module:

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."*

~Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Rationale:** Compassion can be directed towards everyone or it can be focused on just a few. The latter could be called a biased compassion. Based on attachment to kin and those identified as friends, biased compassion can lead people to be protective and nurturing towards a select group. However, if mixed with intolerance, it can also lead to excluding and/or targeting those seen as outside one's sphere of attachment. Thus, factions can arise in which an "us against them" attitude manifests. This can lead to such social maladies as racism, sexism, classism, bullying, and religious intolerance. These dynamics often lead to segments of society being marginalized, devalued, or even targeted for acts of hate.

In contrast, equanimity is an unbiased mind focusing on the common ground between people of all cultures and backgrounds, feeling a sense of worth for all of humanity. Such a benevolent emotional stance allows for the development of an expanded social focus and a sense of interconnectedness. It also serves as a solid ground for building the other compassion skills that follow.

- The equanimity core skill:
  - A. Contemplate the rationale for the equanimity exercise and begin with a brief practice of mindfulness.
  - B. Once settled, consider the following points:
    - We are all equal in wanting to be happy and in wanting to avoid suffering.
    - Everyone wants to be loved, valued, and respected.
    - If people treated each other with equal friendship and respect, it would reduce conflict and strife. The world would be a more peaceful place.
  - C. Think "how wonderful it would be if everyone abided in equanimity. I will try to develop an equal sense of friendliness for everyone." Hold this thought for a while.

**Pilot Group Feedback:** 17 out of 21 respondents reported an increase in equanimity after the exercise.

#### 4.2 Gratitude Core Skill Module:

*The greatest thing is to give thanks for everything.* ~Albert Schweitzer

**Rationale:** Gratitude is a recognition and appreciation of the help we have received that engenders thankfulness and a wish to repay kindness. It helps us overcome self-preoccupation by reminding us of what others have done for us, and low self-worth by reminding us of the value others have shown us. It replaces an internal sense of neediness with a deep sense of how lucky we are to have been cared for during our life by so many. People with high levels of gratitude have less depression, more feelings of well-being and life satisfaction, more trust and altruism, a willingness to forgive, as well as a more agreeable and considerate dispositions (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). It benefits the person towards whom it is directed (Algoe, Frederickson & Gable, 2013) and can be strengthened by simply "counting one's blessings" (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

- The gratitude core skill:
  - A. Contemplate the rationale for the gratitude exercise and begin with brief practice of mindfulness and equanimity.
  - B. When settled, consider the following:
    - How many people helped construct the building you are now using? How many people helped manufacture, transport, and sell the materials used to construct it? Who helps to make sure it is kept clean and in good repair? Who helps to fund and manage it? The number of people is very large. In fact, it is almost infinite. That is, someone had to make the trucks that transported the materials, the gas and the road used by the trucks as well as all the tools that were used to build this place. Therefore, something as simple and commonplace as a building can be looked at in such a way that one can be potentially overwhelmed by a sense of both awe and gratitude.
    - Now ask yourself the same questions about how many people have contributed to:
      - The food you've eaten?

- The clothing you've worn?
- Your health care?
- Your education?
- The technology you've used?
- How many have been a friend, a parent, an ally, a protector?

C. If you feel a sense of gratitude, focus on it for a while and sustain it. Then, think of ways you might be able to repay some of the kindness you've been shown.

*Pilot Group Feedback:* 15 out of 21 respondents reporting an increase in gratitude after the exercise.

#### 4.3 Kindness Core Skill Module:

*All you need is love. ~John Lennon*

*Rationale:* Loving-kindness is the wish for everyone to have happiness and its causes. Loving kindness helps in overcoming anger and intolerance just like water overcomes fire, and therefore clears away obstacles to compassion. It fosters openness to relationships, tolerance, and a sense of belonging.

Like gratitude, loving kindness can be cultivated with little effort yet has great benefits. It helps us connect with others and sustains us through challenging times (Frederickson, et al, 2008). By thinking kindly towards ourselves and then extending those kind thoughts to others, we can slowly build momentary thoughts of kindness, like seeds in our mental garden, which eventually can sprout into genuine feelings of loving kindness.

- Actual presentation of the kindness core skill:
  - A. Contemplate the rationale for the kindness exercise and do a brief practice of mindfulness followed by a short review of equanimity and gratitude.
  - B. When settled, contemplate the following:
    - May I be happy, healthy, and peaceful; may I have joy, contentment, and security; may I have strength, determination, and success in overcoming the difficulties in my life.
      - Make the same wishes for loved ones.
      - Make the same wishes for friends.
      - Make the same wishes for those who upset you (if they were calmer, happier people, they might be better company).
      - Make the same wishes for everyone, everywhere.
  - C. If you feel a sense of loving-kindness, focus on it for a while and sustain it, thinking how wonderful it would be if everyone could have happiness and its causes.

*Pilot Group Feedback:* 8 out of 18 respondents indicated an increase in thoughts of kindness after the exercise. 6 reported a drop in anger levels and 9 reported an increase in feelings of loving kindness.

#### 4.4 Compassion Core Skill Module:

*Compassion is a practically acquired knowledge, like dancing. You must do it and practice diligently day by day.*

*~Karen Armstrong*

*Rationale:* Compassion is the wish that others be free from suffering and its causes. The more self-focused we are, the more neediness and fear we experience as we encounter all the obstacles to well-being that are inherent in life. Since others, like us, want to be loved and respected, the more we focus on ourselves instead of on them, the more likely we are to be shunned and isolated. Since others tend to find a selfish person hard to be around, a sense of loneliness, lack of self-worth and sadness can develop in someone with too much self-preoccupation. Additionally, self-focused attention and maladaptive self-involvement have been related to both anger and coronary artery disease (Scherwitz, et al, 1986).

In contrast, compassion fills us with a sense of purpose and connection to others. It enhances courage, self-confidence, and noble thoughts and deeds. Others enjoy the company of someone filled with compassion, which leads to fulfilling and stable relationships over time. Hardships can be transformed into resilience and insight, forming the basis for a deepening of compassion and sense of shared humanity. Seeing one's own suffering and wishing to be free of it provides a basis for seeing the various forms of suffering others encounter and wishing that they be free as well.

- Actual presentation of the compassion core skill:
  - A. Contemplate the rationale for the compassion exercise and do a brief practice of mindfulness, equanimity, gratitude, and loving-kindness.
  - B. When settled, contemplate the following:
    - Though I want only happiness and not to suffer, life is filled with difficulties and hardships.

- Others, just like me, want only happiness and not to suffer. Yet many face daily hunger, poverty, and homelessness.
- Many encounter conflicts, disrespect, living in fear, imprisonment, torture, abuse, or violence.
- Many experience sickness, frailties of body, and mental distress.
- Life is full of uncertainty and unpleasantness for all of us as we struggle to survive and thrive.

C. If you feel a sense of compassion for yourself and others, focus on it for a while and sustain it, thinking how wonderful it would be if everyone, everywhere could be free from suffering and its causes.

*Pilot Group Feedback:* 7 out of 20 respondents indicated an increase in compassionate thoughts after the exercise. 6 reported a lessening of anger and 10 reported an increase in compassionate feelings.

#### **4.5 Giving and Taking Core Skill Module:**

*As selfishness and complaint pervert the mind, so love with its joy clears and sharpens the vision.*

*~Helen Keller*

*Rationale:* Contemplating one's own suffering and/or the sufferings of others can be unpleasant at first due to a natural tendency to attempt to insulate ourselves from life's harsher realities. However, avoidance can weaken us with denial and self-centered fears, rendering us frail in the face of life's demands, whereas exposure to things that trouble us leads to becoming used to them and thereby overcoming anxiety and fostering resilience (March 1995, Kaplan and Tolin 2011).

"Giving and taking" utilizes visualization to imagine voluntarily taking on hardships and giving away well-being. Its practice facilitates exposure, empowering a helping stance while targeting self-centered fears for reduction. While this practice is only imagined, it can be used to help us stay with difficult situations, and it seems to have calming effect in those who use it, most likely due to the acceptance it engenders. Rather than dwelling on self-centered worries and fears, it helps us to transform them into a deeper connection with others.

- Actual presentation of the giving and taking core skill:
  - A. Contemplate the rationale for the giving and taking exercise and do a brief practice of mindfulness, equanimity, gratitude, loving-kindness, and compassion.
  - B. When settled, contemplate the following:
    - Imagine a future situation you face that is troubling you and picture your fears about it as being like a dark cloud in your chest.
    - Now, with compassion, imagine inhaling the future situation in the form of light. As it enters your chest, it dispels the dark cloud of your fear and fills you with confidence, courage and a sense of well-being.
    - With loving kindness, exhale that sense of well-being and confidence in the form of light to yourself in the future, imagining that it gives you confidence and the ability to overcome the troubling situation.
    - Do the same visualization for someone you care about who is going through hardship.
    - Do the same visualization for loved ones and friends.
    - Do the same visualization, extending it to everyone, everywhere.
  - C. Rest in the visualization of everyone being freed from their suffering and filled with well-being, thinking how wonderful it would be for if you could actually help others find happiness and freedom from suffering.

*Pilot Group Feedback:* 8 out of 17 respondents indicated an increase in thoughts of cherishing others over self after the exercise. 9 reported a lessening in self-focus and 6 reported an increase in their focus on others.

#### **4.6 Activation Core Skill Module:**

*Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For, indeed, that's all who ever have.*

*~Margaret Mead*

*Rationale:* Compassionate thoughts and wishes, cultivated over time, become meaningful when put into action. Without action, the compassion remains in the form of a passive mental potential. By thinking "it is my responsibility to act on my compassion," one activates oneself into meaningful activity. While compassion itself is a healthy mental disposition, it is through compassionate activity that we can directly benefit the conditions of ourselves and others.

- Actual presentation of the activation core skill:

- A. Contemplate the rationale for the activation skill and do a brief practice of mindfulness and the other above exercises.
- B. When settled, contemplate the following:
  - Though I've imagined taking away the sufferings of myself and others, and then imagined us all filled with well-being, in reality the world is still full of suffering.
  - If I don't accept any responsibility for making this world a better place, then whose job is it?
  - If I want this world to improve, it is important that I do my part.
- C. Generate and hold the thought "it is my responsibility to improve the conditions of myself and others."

*Pilot Group Feedback:* 13 out of 20 respondents indicated an increase in activated compassion after the exercise. 6 reported a drop in apathy and 13 reported an increase in feelings of responsibility to help others.

#### **4.7 Goal-focused Compassion Core Skill Module:**

*The meaning of life is to make life meaningful. ~A.C. Grayling*

*Rationale:* Once we become committed to being of benefit to others, life becomes more meaningful. But of course, the challenge of helping others can also be overwhelming and disconcerting. An impulsive approach to helping others can easily lead to disappointment and burnout. Therefore, the last of the compassion core skills helps in the formulation of goals that can sustain and develop our compassion.

If our compassion gets focused only on external goals, we might encounter obstacles beyond our control that can lead to discouragement. But, if we set internal goals as our primary focus, there is a better chance for perseverance and success. For example, if my goal is to achieve world peace by trying to regulate external events, I will likely feel defeated before long. But, if I start with a goal to achieve my own peace of mind as I work for a more peaceful world, there is a better chance that my efforts will bring some internal success over time.

Therefore, it is suggested that participants select an internal goal for their compassion. Examples include "I want to become a more patient person," "I want to become more knowledgeable," "I want to become more skillful in how to help others," etc. It is up to each of us to choose goals that will give a meaningful direction to our compassion.

We can formulate an internal goal by asking ourselves "What do I want to accomplish in life?" "What kind of person do I want to be?" As we assess our strengths, we might decide to enhance them. As we assess our weaknesses, we might decide to reduce them. Again, each of us is our own internal gardener, and therefore, we each must decide what we want to cultivate and what we want to weed out.

- Actual presentation of the goal-focused compassion core skill:
  - A. Contemplate the rationale for goal-focused compassion and do a brief practice of mindfulness together with a brief review of the previous exercises.
  - B. When settled, contemplate the following:
    - In order to sustain compassionate efforts over time, it is important to develop my internal capacities.
    - Take a moment to consider what internal qualities you want to make stronger.
    - Set a goal to develop the qualities you identify as important in order to be of best help to yourself and others.
  - C. Hold your goals single-pointedly while thinking, "I will develop these capacities in order to benefit myself and others."

*Pilot Group Feedback:* 7 out of 17 respondents indicated a higher level of goal-focus after the activity. 6 reported a lessening in feelings of meaninglessness and 9 reported an increase in a sense that life has meaning.

#### **5. Core Analytical Skills**

*Close your eyes & imagine the best version of you possible. That's who you really are, let go of any part of you that doesn't believe it.*

*~ C. Assaad*

*Rationale:* The analytical core skills aim at developing the "insight" aspect of compassionate insight. Once we become skilled in developing goal-focused compassion, these final core skills help us to identify, target, and eliminate cognitive distortions that block our inner progress. There are three steps in the core analytical skills, which all are meant to be presented within a single session:

1. Identifying distortions in self-concept
2. Dispelling them through mindful analysis



### 3. Identifying with compassionate insight

These analytic skills have similarities with cognitive restructuring, which is one of the most effective and well-researched approaches to gaining and enhancing mental health (e.g., Dobson & Dobson, 2009; Hofmann, Asaanai, Vonk, et al, 2012). The basic tenets of cognitive restructuring hold that we each create our own internal realities based on the judgments we formulate as we try to make sense of our experiences. We develop a schema of memory patterns in order to organize information that serves as a reference point for our judgments and assessments of reality.

These cognitive schemas are developed early in life and can be distorted based on early experiences and our reactions to them. For example, we might develop a schema that tells us “I am unworthy of love” based on early reactions to the unavailability of a parent. Or we might be overly harsh in our judgments towards ourselves and others based on experiences with a parent who was overly critical. Schemas that are overly negative (or positive) can distort our perceptions and choices thus forming obstacles to developing our fullest potentials. For example, a diminished sense of self can lead to feeling worthless, helpless, and hopeless. Such a distortion exacerbates depression and anxiety, sapping motivation. At the other extreme, an inflated sense of self can lead to feeling superior to others, entitled, invulnerable and so forth. Such inflated distortions exacerbate inconsideration, self-indulgence, and unrealistic expectations, which tend to increase narcissism and its ensuing problems. By identifying, reducing, and eliminating such distortions, we can arrive at a more realistic and healthy sense of self in which we can see our vulnerabilities and interdependence together with our value, strengths, and potential. Therefore, the first step in the COMPASS analytical core skills is to try to identify underlying schemas and distortions in self-concept.

One way to begin to recognize our underlying schema is to ask ourselves how we react to challenges to our self-esteem. Particularly, it is helpful to watch our minds when we are angry, hurt, or depressed, looking for things we say to ourselves about our self-worth and about the worth of others, particularly about those we feel have wronged us. Usually, in such circumstances, our reactions compel us to act, but such impulse-driven reactions usually result in a bigger problem for ourselves and others. So, in this case, instead of acting on such impulses, the approach is to observe them and look closely at the self-perceptions behind them.

The second step in the core analytical skills is to use mindfulness to steady our minds as we analyze our self-perceptions, asking ourselves whether or not they are true. After all, thoughts are not facts. If we are honest and discerning, we can see that most or all of our concepts about reality have distortions in them. Concepts are images or pictures of reality. They are not reality itself. Reality itself is a constantly changing matrix that is complex and interdependent. In comparison, our concepts about it can often be rigid, simplistic, and erring. By analyzing our concepts, at times we can see distortions for what they are and let go of them. At such times, it is as if the distorted concept vanishes and the intensity of the emotional reaction that had been engendered by the cognitive distortion disappears along with it. In this way, we have successfully removed a psychological weed from our inner gardens.

The third and last step of the core analytical skills is to remind ourselves of the compassionate goal we have set for ourselves, and allow that goal to be our guiding impulse as we emerge from the analysis described above. In cases where we have analyzed our reactions to a difficult situation, we can let the impulse of our compassionate goal guide us in our deliberations about how to respond to the situation. In this way, our compassionate goal begins to define who we become and what we do.

- Actual presentation of the analytical core skills:
  - A. After contemplating the rationale for analytical core skills as described above and a brief practice of mindfulness, do a short review of the core compassion exercises.
  - B. When settled into goal-focused compassion, contemplate the following:
    1. Identifying a cognitive distortion:
      - Within a calm and clear state of awareness, recall an incident that is troubling to you.
      - Focus on your reactions to the situation, looking for how the situation affects your self-concept.
      - If you identify any distortion in self-concept, hold it clearly in mind.
    2. Analyzing the self-concept:
      - Ask yourself whether this concept of you is of mental or physical nature.
      - Mentally search for such a self within the various parts of your body and mind.
      - Recognizing that this concept is just that, a concept, allow it to dissolve along with the reactions it has aroused.
    3. Defining self-concept using compassionate wisdom:

- Within the clarity of your awareness, recall your compassionate goal.
- Imagine that compassionate goal takes the form of a healing, soothing ball of light in your chest.
- As you focus on your compassionate goal, imagine the light gets brighter, filling your body with light and melting away all of your internal obstacles to reaching your goal.
- Imagine that light going out from your pores, dispelling the problems of your loved-ones, friends, acquaintances, and eventually, everyone everywhere.

C. Hold that image single-pointedly while identifying with your compassion and insight.

*Pilot Group Feedback:* 14 out of 19 respondents indicated an enhanced sense of seeing self-concept as repairable after the exercise. 13 reported an increase in confidence.

## 6. Conclusion

The above test group feedback suggests that these exercises helped many of the participants gain an elevation of positive cognitive and emotional states along with a lessening of afflictive states. But it is unclear how long the benefits were felt. Measures of participants' perceived stress, ability to maintain mindfulness, and self-compassion at the beginning of the semester, and again at the end of the semester, showed little change and some slippage, most likely due to the normal student reactions to stressors brought on by an intense master's program curriculum. The post assessments were made in the final weeks of the semester when students were facing final exams and multiple projects coming due. Perhaps future studies with both control and experimental groups can be designed to account for such external factors.

For instance, if two classes on the same subject (with similar curriculum and task demands) were administered pre and post tests to monitor stress, self-compassion, mindfulness, and compassion levels, one of the classes could be used as an experimental group with COMPASS training while the other class without COMPASS training could serve as a control. That way, the normal stress factors incurred during a school semester would be taken into account. Another approach could be to compare pre and post testing of a control group exposed to mindfulness practice alone to an experimental group trained in the COMPASS system.

It would be interesting to see if a more lasting benefit might be possible through repeated practice of the skills. It is suspected that repetition of the skills over time could deepen the impact and profundity of one's experience with the goal of eventually producing a calm, steady mind imbued with compassionate insight. Indeed, developing compassionate and insight is a lifelong task. The COMPASS approach merely provides a method for this noble endeavor.

It is likely that if students from a young age were regularly taught the above strategies, there would be a cumulative effect over time. As increasing numbers of students became more able to experience compassionate thoughts and feelings, school climate would likely improve and bullying would find opposition from the student body at large.

## 7. Addendum: COMPASS for Younger Children

1. Foundation Practice of Mindfulness: It is important to keep the mindfulness exercise short and simple, especially with young children. One can say "I want everyone to join me in taking a breath. Breathe in calm, breathe out and relax." Repeat this last phrase three or four times while demonstrating calm, mindful breaths.
2. Equanimity Core Skill: After a brief session of mindfulness, remind them of the *golden rule*, asking "Why is it important to treat others the way we want to be treated?" After a discussion on this, the leader can mention that we are all equal in wanting to be happy and not wanting to suffer. We all want to be cared for with respect, and therefore, it is important to be equally friendly and respectful to each other.
3. Gratitude Core Skill: After a few mindful breaths, remind them of the golden rule and of how everyone is equal in wanting to be happy and not wanting to suffer. Then lead them in a discussion of things they are grateful for and people who have helped them. Let them suggest ways they might try to help in return.
4. Kindness Core Skill: After a few mindful breaths, remind them of the previous exercises. Then lead them in saying to themselves:
  - May I be happy and safe.
  - May my family be happy and safe.
  - May my friends be happy and safe.
  - May everyone be happy and safe.

5. Compassion Core Skill: After a few mindful breaths, remind them of the previous exercises. Then ask them to share a time that they or people they know were unhappy or sad. End the session by asking them to join you in the wish that they and everyone everywhere could be free from suffering and its causes.
6. Giving and Taking Core Skill: After a few mindful breaths, remind them of the previous exercises. Then lead them in a discussion of ways that they could be helpful to others.
7. Activation Core Skill: After a few mindful breaths, remind them of the previous exercises and of things that they discussed doing to help others during the previous meeting. Suggest that they make a plan for a way to be helpful to someone today. Ask them to draw a picture of something they will do to help someone.
8. Goal-Focused Compassion Core Skill: After a few mindful breaths, remind them of the previous exercises. Review the children's pictures and accounts of their attempts to help someone that they formulated in the last session. Ask them what they learned from their attempts to be helpful and what they need to learn in order to improve their abilities to help others.
9. Analytical Core Skill: After a few mindful breaths, remind them of the previous exercises, their attempts to help others, and of things they said they need to learn order to improve their abilities to help others. Ask them to imagine that their wish to learn new ways to be helpful to others becomes a soothing ball of light in their chests, filling them with light, melting away all of their worries, and shining out to everyone around them.

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<sup>ii</sup> This and other research pertaining to compassion training and the need for it in public education can be found in an article by Davidson, Richard J. et al (Mind and Life Education Research Network: MLERN), "Contemplative Practices and Mental Training: Prospects for American Education," published in *Child Development Perspectives*, Volume 6, Number 2, 2012, pp 146-153.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> For readers wishing to learn more about the techniques as they are presented in the Tibetan tradition, please see *Achieving Bodhicitta* by Sermei Kensur Lobsang Tharchin (Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, Howell, New Jersey, 1999) and *Mind Training, The Great Collection* translated by Thubten Jinpa (Wisdom Publications, Inc., Somerville, MA, 2006). Also, a more condensed version of traditional mind training with support from current research can be found in the introduction to *The Water and Wood Shastras* by the Third Gungthang Rinpoche, Venerable Konchok Tenpai Dronme, translated into English by Yeshe Khedrup and Wilson Hurley, Karuna Publications, 2012 ([www.karunapublications.org](http://www.karunapublications.org)), pp. 13-77.

<sup>v</sup> For example, see Reddy, S., Negi, L.T., Dodson-Lavelle, B., Ozawa-de Silva, B., Pace, T.W., Cole, S.P., Raison, C.L., and Craighead, L. (2012) "Cognitive-Based Compassion Training: A promising prevention strategy for at-risk adolescents." *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.

<sup>vi</sup> For example, see Jazaieri, H., Jinpa, G., McGonigal, K., Rosenberg, E., Finkelstein, J., Simon-Thomas, E., Cullen, M., Doty, J., Gross, J., & Goldin, P. (2012). Enhancing compassion: A randomized controlled trial of a Compassion Cultivation Training program. *Journal of Happiness Studies* and Jinpa, T. (2010). *Compassion cultivation training (CCT): Instructor's manual*. Unpublished, Stanford, CA. from the Stanford website.)

<sup>vii</sup> This diagram was adapted from one found on the web site of Mindful Schools ([www.mindfulschools.org](http://www.mindfulschools.org)) and has been included here with their permission.

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