The Compassionate-Mind Approach to Overcoming Anxiety: Using CFT to Treat Worry, Panic, and Fear

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April 14, 2012
Anxiety Disorders Association of America

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Our Talk Today

Outline basic philosophy and model of Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT)

Note the powerful effects of our self-evaluation systems (self-criticism vs self compassion)

Explore the application of CFT to the treatment of Anxiety
The human brain is the product of many millions of years of evolution – a process of conserving, modifying and adapting.
To understand ourselves we must understand our brains.
why we have complex brains and minds that are difficult to understand regulate

1. Old Brain
   Emotions: Anger, anxiety, sadness, joy, lust
   Behaviours: Fight, flight, withdraw, engage
   Relationships: Sex, status, attachment, tribalism

2. New Brain
   – Imagination, fantasise, look back and forward, plan, ruminate
   – Integration of mental abilities
   – Self-awareness, self-identity, and self-feeling

3. Social Brain
   Need for affection and care
   Socially responsive, self-experience and motives

What happens when new brain is recruited to pursue old brain passions?
Interaction of old and new psychologies

Old Brain: Emotions, Motives, Relationship, Seeking-Creating, Archetypal

New Brain: Imagination, Planning, Rumination, Integration
Understanding our Motives and Emotions

Motives evolved because they help animals to survive and leave genes behind.

Emotions guide us to our goals and respond if we are succeeding or threatened.

There are three types of emotion regulation:

1. Those that focus on threat and self-protection
2. Those that focus on doing and achieving
3. Those that focus on contentment and feeling safe
Types of Affect Regulator Systems

- **Incentive/resource-focused**
  - Wanting, pursuing, achieving, consuming
  - Activating

- **Non-wanting/Affiliative focused**
  - Safeness-kindness
  - Soothing

- **Threat-focused**
  - Protection and Safety-seeking
  - Activating/inhibiting

- **Anger, anxiety, disgust**

- **Drive, excite, vitality**

- **Content, safe, connected**
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Self-Protection

In species without attachment only 1-2% make it to adulthood to reproduce. Threats come from ecologies, food shortage, predation, injury, disease. At birth individuals must be able to “go it alone” be mobile and disperse.
Dispersal and avoid others
Protect and Comfort: Less ‘instinctive brain – post birth learning
Caring as “looking after”. Seeking closeness rather than dispersion. Individuals obtain protection, food, and care when ill. Key also is soothing-calming and physiological regulation. Few offspring but high survival rate in comparison to species without attachment. Affection and kindness

Co-operative and mutual support can develop as we see that our prosperity impacts on that of others, sharing and not-exploiting
Self-Compassion

Higher levels of reported self-compassion have been found to be correlated with lower levels of depression and anxiety (Neff, 2003; Neff, Hseih, & Dejitthirat, 2005; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Neff and colleagues’ research has demonstrated positive correlations among self-compassion and a range of positive psychological dimensions (Neff, Rude, et al., 2007). These factors include, but aren’t limited to life satisfaction, feelings of social connectedness (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007), and personal initiative and positive affect (Neff, Rude, et al., 2007).
Internal Threat and Soothing

Internal representations of helpful others and sources of comfort

Emotional memories of soothing

Neurophysiological networks

Self-affiliation – experiences a lovable self
Internal Threat and More threat

Threat

Affiliative/Soothing

Calms

No self-affiliation – experiences a unlovable self

Others are threats or alarming

Emotional memories of no soothing

Neurophysiological networks
Compassion Solutions

Ancient wisdom

Compassion is the road to happiness
(Buddhism)

Evolution

Evolution has made our brains highly sensitive to internal and external kindness

Neuroscience

Specific brain areas are focused on detecting and responding to kindness and compassion
Compassion

Compassion can be defined in many ways: “As a sensitivity to the suffering of self and others with a deep commitment to try to relieve it” Dalai Lama

Eight fold path - represents a multi-modal approach for training one’s mind
Compassion as Flow

Different practices for each

Other → Self

Self → Other

Self → Self

Non-linear empathy for other begins early in life
Data

• Practice of imagining compassion for others produces changes in frontal cortex and immune system (Lutz et al, 2009)

• Loving kindness meditation (compassion directed to self, then others, then strangers) increases positive emotions, mindfulness, feelings of purpose in life and social support and decreases illness symptoms (Frederickson et al, 2008, JPSP)

• Compassion meditation (6 weeks) improves immune function, and neuroendocrine and behavioural responses to stress (Pace, 2008, PNE)

• Compassion training reduces shame and self-criticism in chronic depressed patients (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006, CPP)
Key Targets of Therapy

Attention

Thinking Reasoning

Imagery
Fantasy

Behaviour

Motivation

Emotions

Their pattern gives rise to a certain type of mind
Compassionate Mind

- Attention
- Thinking Reasoning
- Imagery Fantasy
- Motivation
- Emotions
- Behaviour

Compassion
Threatened Mind can block Compassion

- Attention
- Thinking
- Reasoning
- Imagery
- Fantasy
- Threat
- Motivation
- Emotions
- Behaviour
Self-Critical Mind is also Threat-focused Mind

- Attention
- Thinking Reasoning
- Imagery Fantasy
- Self-Critical
- Motivation
- Emotions
- Behaviour
How our own thoughts and images affect our brains

Pink represents our inner images and thoughts
Compassionate Mind

Self-Compassionate

- Attention
- Thinking Reasoning
- Imagery Fantasy
- Behaviour
- Motivation
- Emotions
Why a Compassion Focus?

People with chronic problems often come from neglectful or abusive backgrounds, have high levels of shame, and are often self-critical, self-disliking, or self-hating.

Live in a world of constant internal and external threat.

Have few experiences of feeling safe or soothed and are not able to do this for themselves. Often do poorly in trials.
Fear of Compassion

Certain types of positive feelings are threatening

It is dangerous to feel safe

Compassion feeling are linked to beliefs such that it’s an indulgence and weakness

Activated grief and or abuse memories
PROBLEM - Compassion is a threat

- Compassionate imagery
- Re-focusing
- Compassionate
- Mentalizing

Threat

Affiliative/Soothing

- Shame-self criticism
- Fear of closeness
- Trauma Memory
- Meta-beliefs
- Mentalizing
Kindness, Attachment and Threat

Kindness from therapist or imagery

Activate attachment system
Activate memories

Fight, flight shut down

Neglect aloneness
Abuse, shame vulnerable

Activate learnt and current defences - cortisol

Bowlby: Kindness opens the attachment system and then whatever ever fears, anger or despair is coded there will become available and can be intensely threatening
Therapy

Life history and contextual rather than symptom focused

Background, key threats, safety strategies undesired/unintended consequence

High focus on validation, on “not your fault,” courage and doing your best.

Clarify three circle model and why we will explore helpful behaviour for each circles

Desensitisation to affiliative positive affect – to be able to feel safe and self compassionate