

Ask the Professional

Monthly eZine

The International Association of Counselors and Therapists

A newsletter designed to explore alternative models in holistic health care disciplines



Self Compassion: A Prerequisite for Change with Birgit Zottmann

IACT: Thank you for your participation. Let's begin with an overview of your training and/or experience in hypnosis. How did you first become interested in the profession?

BZ: I smoked cigarettes for many years. After a psychological seminar the trainer asked me if I would like to learn hypnosis. I told him that if I quit smoking with hypnosis I would learn it. And I quit smoking very, very easily. This happened 18 years ago and changed a lot in my life.

IACT: Where did you receive your training?

BZ: My first hypnosis training I received with Prof. Arno Müller in Düsseldorf (Germany).

I received hypnosis trainings also with John Petrocelli (US), Cal Banyan (US), Ron Eslinger (US), and American Academy of Medical Hypnoanalysts (US) Igor Ledochowsky (US), Jon Butler (UK) and Melissa Tiers (US).

I'm a certified Strategic Intervention Coach (Robbins-Madanes Center of Strategic Intervention) and a teacher of Mindfulness-Bases Stress Reduction (University of Massachusetts, Medical School).

IACT: Tell us how you came to understand the link between self compassion and change.

BZ: I ask my clients how they would treat a dog. Would they treat it with respect or harshness? Of course they would treat their dog with kindness.

Because a dog trained by being beaten, will be obedient but very inflexible and terrified. The dog may obey but he will also be neurotic and confused. By contrast, training with kindness results in flexibility and confidence.

Most of my clients treat themselves in a very harsh voice and in a disrespectful manner. They don't need a real enemy in the outside world. The inner critic acts like an enemy in himself.

My clients want to change their feelings and habits and this is much easier if they are able to be responsible for themselves. The goal is to be best friend with you and then change is not only possible but also inevitable.

Here are some scientific findings that may be of interest:

Without constant self-criticism, people worry, that they skip work, eat three tubs of ice cream and watch series all day. In others words, isn't self-compassion really the same thing as self-indulgence? As you will see, self-compassion makes you feel more responsible for you and you are more aware of the choices you have.

Scientific Research shows that people who tend to be overly self-critical are much more likely to be anxious and depressed. They also have lower self-efficacy beliefs, which undermine their potential for success. Self-critical people often don't even try achieving their goals because they fear failure.

For the past decade Kristin Neff (she is an associate professor in the University of Texas at Austin's of educational psychology) has been conducting research on self-compassion. She found out that people who are compassionate to themselves are much less likely to be depressed, anxious, and stressed, and is much more likely to be happy, resilient, and optimistic about their future. In other words they have better mental health.

That means when you feel compassion for your own pain — especially when the pain comes from your maladaptive habits and behaviors —you want to heal your pain. You feel responsible for yourself and want to make changes and improvements that will help you suffer less.

While the motivational power of self-criticism comes from fear of self-punishment, the motivational power of self-compassion comes from the desire to be healthy.

Self-compassion recognizes that failure happens - but it's also our best teacher. Self-compassion also allows us to acknowledge that imperfection is part of the shared human experience. We can then work on improving ourselves, not because we're unacceptable as we are, but because we want to grow and be happy.

Self-compassionate people:

Set high standards for themselves, but they aren't as upset when they don't meet their goals. Instead, research shows that they're more likely to set new goals for themselves after failure rather than wallowing in feelings of frustration and disappointment.

Have more intrinsic motivation in life — trying hard because they want to learn and grow.

Are more likely to take responsibility for their past mistakes, while acknowledging them with greater emotional calmness. Research also shows that self-compassion helps people engage in healthier behaviors like sticking to their weight-loss goals, exercising, quitting smoking and seeking medical care when needed.

Self-compassion is not the same as being easy on us. It's a way of nurturing our self so that we can reach our full potential.

IACT: Do you have a specific protocol that you incorporate into your work for using self compassion for change?

BZ: I start hypnotherapy with a 3-hour session. In this session I prepare clients for the change. Change make human beings often insecure and feeling vulnerable. The content of this session is: self-compassion, how to treat negative thoughts and emotions, how to treat parts like the inner critic, and more.

1. First I ask my client who is the most important person for them. Very few people answer this question with: Of course that's me. The answer: "I know that should be me but I don't feel the way" I hear very often and sometimes their dog is the most important being.

2. If I don't get the "right" answer I tell them something about being egoistic in a healthy way. I remind them of the bible: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." When we can't love our self we are not able to love other people. If we can't love our self we do not feel responsible for us. We can't change the world but we can change ourselves.

3. I ask my clients to give me 10 things they can do to make themselves happy. The weight loss clients have to hang this list on the refrigerator.

4. I tell them about the benefits of being kind to themselves. I give them something to read: My favorites are books of Pema Chodron, Christine Neff, and Paul Germer. And I give them homework. For example: In the morning while they are lying in the bed they have to consider what they are doing nice for themselves today. And they have to do the self-compassion exercise:

The basic words I use are:

May I be healthy – (Healthy means more than the absence of sickness)

May I be happy – (to be happy is a state we all like to attain)

May I accept myself unconditionally – (acceptance means starting where we are, without judging and fighting against us)

Then the words are sent from heart to heart to someone or a group of people we care about or are thankful for. And after that, the words are sent from heart to heart to all people of the world.

The exercise is described in my book: "Feeling your feet on the ground. Rewiring your brain with mindful interventions." https://www.amazon.com/Feeling-your-feet-ground-interventions/dp/1987512707/ref=sr_1_12?ie=UTF8&qid=1536042438&sr=8-12&keywords=Birgit+Zottmann

You can hear me practicing the exercise on YouTube:

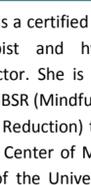
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Z2W6XhnlLs>

IACT: Your response is so full of great information. Thank you! Is there anything further you'd like to share that we've overlooked?

BZ: I think we've covered it all. Thank you so much for allowing me to share with your readers.

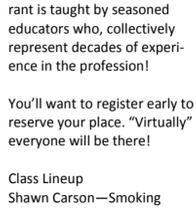


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Birgit is a certified hypnotherapist and hypnosis instructor. She is trained as a MBSR (Mindful Based Stress Reduction) teacher in the Center of Mindfulness of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the University of Jon Kabat-Zinn. She is practicing in private practice hypnosis and mindfulness since 15 year in Frankfurt (Germany) and is an expert in handling clients with weight problems and stress related symptoms.



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