Compassion Focused Therapy
An Introduction

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www.Compassionatewellbeing.com

Responsibility
• During the workshop we will be engaging in various exercises such as compassionate imagery or working on self-criticism
• All exercises are entirely voluntary
• You are responsible for your own well-being
• All shared material is confidential
• You are clinically responsible for how you use CFT

Basic Overview
• Offer a review of Compassion Focused Therapy
• How and why it stated
• Rooted in an evolutionary and neuroscience approach to psychological processes
• The focus on shame and self-criticisms
• Key strategies that we use in CFT

How did CFT Start
• Clinical observation of people struggling with standard therapies
• Long focus on shame and self-criticism which are known to be linked to poor outcomes
• Interest in basic evolved systems that regulate a range of psychological processes

What is helpful
Cognitive-Behavioural focused therapies help people distinguish unhelpful thoughts and behaviours - that increase or accentuate negative feelings - and alternative helpful thoughts and behaviours that do the opposite. This approach works well when people experience these alternatives as helpful. However, suppose they say, “I can see the logic and it should feel helpful but I cannot feel reassured by them” or “I know that I am not to blame but still feel to blame”.

Key Message
• We need to feel congruent affect in order for our thoughts to be meaningful to us. Thus emotions ‘tag’ meaning onto experiences. In order for us to be reassured by a thought (say “I am lovable” this thought needs to link with the emotional experience of ‘being lovable’). If the positive affect system for such linkage is not activated there is little feeling to the thought. People who have few memories/experiences of being lovable or soothed may thus struggle to feel reassured and safe by alternative thoughts
• Compassion focused therapy therefore targets the activation of the soothing system so that it can be more readily accessed and used to help regulate threat based emotions of anger, fear, and disgust and shame
Nature of the problem

- Able to look at things in different ways – but don’t feel any better
- Able to generate alternative thoughts – but don’t feel any better

Question:
What are the mechanisms that help people feel better?

Why do we need Compassion?
Life is Hard

How New is Evolution Approach in Psychopathology?
Freud (id), Jung (archetypes), and Bowlby (attachment) all developed theories with an evolutionary focus

Anxiety disorders are related to how cognitions trigger innate defences - fight, flight, demobilisation (Beck et al., 1985; Marks, 1987) – danger modes (Beck, 1996)

Depressions are related to evolved mechanisms for coping with defeats and loss (Beck, 1983, 1987; Gilbert 1984, 1992)

Personality disorders are related to the under or over development of innate strategies (e.g. cooperation vs. competition: Beck, Freeman et al., 1990; Gilbert, 1989)

Towards a science of the two psychologies of compassion

Science of compassion
Science of compassion must begin with an understanding of

- The 'complex and often chaotic' nature of the human mind
- The components that create a compassionate mind
- How to cultivate a compassionate mind
- What undermines a compassionate mind

Compassion begins with a reality check.
We are an emergent species in the ‘flow of life’ so our brains, with their motives, emotions and competencies are products of evolution, designed to function in certain ways.

We are designed for wanting, craving needing and seeking permanence – to fear and aggress, to love and to grieve – to know of our destiny
Compassion begins with a reality check

We are an emergent species in the 'flow of life' so our brains, with their motives, emotions and competencies are products of evolution, designed to function in certain ways.

Our lives are short (25,000-30,000 days), decay and end. We are subject to various malfunctions and diseases – in a genetic lottery. Everything changes – the nature of impermanence – the nature of tragedy

The social circumstances of our lives, over which we have no control, have major implications for the kinds of minds we have, the kind of person we become, the values we endorse, and the lives we live.

So, Basic Philosophy is That:

We all just find ourselves here with a brain, emotions and sense of (socially made) self we did not choose but have to figure out.

Life involves dealing with tragedies (threats, losses, diseases, decay, death) and people do the best they can.

Much of what goes on in our minds is not of 'our design' and not our fault.

We are all in the same boat.

De-pathologising and de-labelling – understanding unique coping processes.

Causes of Suffering

- The evolution of the Brain
- Evolutionary functionary analysis
- Genotype and phenotype

New Psychologies Emerge in the World

1 million?
Human
(2 million?)
Mammalian
(120 million?)
Reptilian
(500 million?)

Extended caring
Symbolic thought and self-identity, theory of mind, meta-cognition
Caring, group, alliance-building, play, status
Territory, fear, aggression, sex, hunting

Need compassion for a very tricky brain

New Brain: Imagination, Planning, Rumination, Integration

Old Brain: Emotions, Motives, Relationship Seeking-Creating
Built in Biases
Compassion insights

Biased learning – e.g., fear of snakes not electricity
Biases can be implicit (non-conscious) or explicit (Conscious)

Self-focused
Kin preferences – (nepotism)
In-group preferences – (tribalism)

Need compassion for a very tricky brain

Mindful Brain

New Brain: Imagination, Planning, Rumination, Integration

Old Brain: Emotions, Motives, Relationship Seeking-Creating

COMPASSION

Need compassion for a very tricky brain

Mindful Brain

New Brain: Imagination, Planning, Rumination, Integration

Old Brain: Emotions, Motives, Relationship Seeking-Creating

Competitive

Your Brain in a Social Signal Processor
Humans evolved complex competencies to send and receive social signals that are motive congruent – create interactional sequences that are mutually influencing

Send
SELF
OTHER
Receive

CFT focuses on the fact the brain evolved to respond to social signals and communications –

Functional Analysis of Emotions
Understanding our Motives and Emotions

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

Emotions guide us to our (social) goals, 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drive, excite, vitality</th>
<th>Content, safe, connected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incentive/resource-focused</td>
<td>Non-wanting/Affiliative focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting, pursuing, achieving, consuming</td>
<td>Safety-kindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activating</td>
<td>Soothing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Threat-focused
Protection and Safety-seeking
Activating/inhibiting

Anger, anxiety, disgust

Threat-focused
Protection and Safety-seeking
Activating/inhibiting

Anger

Body/feelings
- Tense
- Heart increase
- Dry mouth
- "Butterflies"
- Afraid

Attention/Thinking
- Narrow-focused
- Danger threat
- Scan – search
- Internal vs. external (attribution prediction)

Behaviour
- Increase outputs
- Aggressive display
- Approach
- Dissociate

Conflicts of Emotions

Anger blocks Anxiety
Sadness

Each emotion can have its own body states, cognitions, action tendencies and memories.
Understand conflicts between Motives, Emotions and Strategies

What gets Blocked?

Varieties of Positive Emotions

EFA

Types of Affect Regulator Systems

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

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

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

Lottery £££££

Body/feelings
- Activation
- Heart increase
- Pressure to act
- Disrupt sleep

Attention/Thinking
- Narrow-focused
- Acquiring
- Explorative
- Internal vs. external (attribution prediction)

Behaviours
- Approach
- Malign
- Socialize
- Restless
- Celebrating

Anger, anxiety, disgust
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

Contentment

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
The Mammalian Importance of Caring Minds

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.

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Between self and others

Self to self

Calms

Affiliative/Sothing

120 Million year evolving system to regulate threat

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Safeness - connecting and the parasympathetic system: The Vagus Nerve

- PNS influence on heart rate—slows heart down during outbreath
- Associated with affiliation, tend & befriend, general positive emotional tone
- Sensitive to safeness

Parasympathetic nerves to heart

Slows HR

Sympathetic nerves to heart

Increases HR
Successive Inter-beat Intervals (ms)

| 945 | 897 | 858 | 799 | 821 | 846 | 851 | 858 | 879 | 879 |

Standard Deviation of Inter-beat Intervals over 300 second period = SDNN

Source: www.coherence.com

‘New Brain’ with Frontal cortex and PNS

- HRV ass. with flexibility
- Mindful attention
- Control of attention
- Reflective thinking
- Empathy – mentalizing
- Not acting on emotions

‘Some Overloads for New brain

- Chronic sympathetic arousal
- Rapid shifts of attention
- No time for reflective thinking
- Fear based (personal distress) based arousal
- Self-criticism and self-doubt
- Systemic failures in support

Attachment

- Proximity seeking – desire closeness, to be with
- Safe base – source of security to go out and explore and develop confidence
- Safe haven – source of conflict comment and emotion regulation
- Social signals are the drivers (social mentality)
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Functions of Caring-Attachments - Needs Sensitivity
The Caregiver-Provider offers...

Protection: anticipating/preventing; build nest out of harms way, defending/standing up for – advocate
Distress-call responsive – listening out for; rescuing; coming to the aid of – responding to distress
Provision: physical care, hygiene, food
Affection: warmth positive affects that acts as key inputs for brain maturation
Education and Validation: teach/learn life skills in family context, understanding one’s own mind
Interaction: being present, stimulating and regulating various affect systems; curiosity, play, soothing – socialising agent – shaping phenotypes

Internal Threat and Soothing
Self-affiliation – experiences a lovable self
Emotional memories of soothing
Internal representations of helpful others and sources of comfort
Neurophysiological networks
Affiliative/Soothing
Calms
Threat
### Functional Safeness

- Calms
- Affiliative/Sothing

- Can regulate threat via access to others and later internal soothing
- Safe to explore and have open attention – development of (social) intelligence
- Develop mentalizing and empathy skills

### Internal Threat and More Threat

- Calms
- Affiliative/Sothing

- Others are threats or alarming
- Emotional memories of no soothing
- Neurophysiological networks

### Relationship between Defence and Safeness in Attachment

#### Attachment Relationship

- **Defensive**
  - Better safe than sorry
  - Prime fight, flight, submission, help seek, damage limitation

- **Safe**
  - Enhancement (to dam lim)
  - Explore, develop, initiate, creative, novel, open, relaxed

#### Role Relationships

- It is relative balance that is important – related to complex internal relationship

### Types of Affect Regulator Systems

#### Incentive/resource-focused

- Wanting, pursuing, achieving, consuming
- Drive, excite, vitality
- Content, safe, connected

#### Non-wanting/Affiliative focused

- Protection and Safety-seeking
- Activating/inhibiting
- Content, safe, connected

#### Threat-focused

- Loss of Control
- Shame prone
- Self-critical
- Defeated inferior
- Anger, anxiety, disgust

### Types of Affect Regulator Systems

#### Threat with drive

- Safety behaviours
- Do more
- Rushing
- Need to achieve
- Pride

#### Contentedness? Safeness? Connectedness?

- Threat-focused

### Depressed States

#### Drive, excite, vitality

- Cant look forward
- Feeling of inner deadness
- Despair
- Trapped
- Dread
- Angry
- Anxious
- Defeated
- Anger, anxiety, disgust

- Separated
- Alone
- Disconnected
- No-one understands
- Unsafe
Affiliative emotions and social contexts: Combat trauma

Affiliative system highly linked to male buddy system – provides sense of safeness and connectedness in threatening environments.

Affiliative system, when one comes home, is now NOT entrained for safe environments, partner and child relating – loss of feeling safeness and affection plus increase threat system activation — and sense emptiness disorientation and self-blame.

Therapists must explain – plus help understand experience of grieving.

Loneliness

- Most common experience for many clients is in a sense of loneliness – affiliative system is not accessible.
- The most common reason that people seek religion is to find a way of breaking through a 'feeling of being alone'.
- Feelings of aloneness are highly associated with other emotions such as fear or anger.
- Aloneness makes the threat emotions very difficult to work on and in particular the process of grieving.
- CFT is particularly interested in trying to work with feelings of disconnection, alienation, separation – this feeling of being unworthy, alone.