

Maintaining a Healthy Mind

Instructions:

Self-awareness journal

Our ability to show compassion is one of our greatest attributes compared to other species as it allows us to empathise with others and connect. The Dalai Lama defines compassion as 'a sensitivity to the suffering of self and others with a deep wish and commitment to relieve suffering.'

The key attributes and qualities for being compassionate are:

- Making a conscious decision to be compassionate
- Being sensitive to feelings, thoughts and needs
- Being open and showing sympathy to suffering of self and others
- Tolerating (not suppressing) feelings – facing them and being more reflective
- Being curious and open-hearted about thoughts and feelings with the aim of understanding them
- Accepting and observing without criticism or judgment

Developing compassion and kindness for ourselves and others helps us to settle our feelings. Conversely, criticism, including self-criticism, stimulates the threat response which can lead to avoidance, aggressiveness, closing down and submission.

In maintaining a self-awareness journal it is vitally important to do so with compassion – the objective is to observe your thoughts, feelings and actions without judgment. You have developed your own unique responses to situations based on your life experiences and the way that your brain interpreted those experiences and translated them.

By maintaining a journal you are taking the first step in understanding your automatic response patterns from which you will be able to develop new patterns that will yield better outcomes.

Step 1: Choose a regular time each day to reflect and update your self awareness journal – by carving out time in your routine and keeping to a regular time you are more likely to establish this as a new habit that you will be able to maintain. If you can attach it to something that you already do it will make it even easier to get started and maintain.

Step 2: Identify emotions in your body

Start with becoming aware of how you experience feelings in your body. For example, when did you last have an uncomfortable feeling in your stomach? When did you last get an adrenalin rush? When did you last feel stressed and where did it show in your body?

Sometimes the effects of our emotions are obvious, at other times they can be more subtle. Here are some examples to get you started:

When you [feel an emotion]you often [notice a bodily response]

- have a near miss when driving get hot and your neck muscles feel tense
- are embarrassed go red in the face and laugh
- are frustrated start fidgeting in your chair
- are in physical danger start to shake and feel cold
- are angry raise your voice and feel warm

Write down the emotions that you felt today and how they manifested in your body

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Step 3: Identify how you usually act when you feel a particular emotion

Look at each of the following situations and, if you have ever experienced them, and identify the emotion and reaction/behaviour you experienced at the time:

Situation

When....

Emotion/reaction

you often....

One of your colleagues fails to say 'good morning' to you

You nearly hit someone or something in your car

You do something clumsy

You are criticized for some work you have done

You are given praise for some work you have done

You are late for a meeting

Someone else is late for a meeting

Your plane is delayed by two hours

You are asked to do a task you find boring

You lose interest in something

Note down your own situations and your usual response to them.

Step 4: As you build up a record of your emotions and responses you will start to identify common patterns in your behaviours. Note down the patterns that you have noticed.

You will be able to use this awareness to evaluate whether your usual responses are the most effective ones – what impact do they have on you? What impact do they have on other people? Do they result in the outcome that you would like? How could you react differently?