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Self-Compassion for Counselors-in-Training

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of self-compassion and how counselors-in-training (CITs) can develop and refine their self-compassion practice to improve their experience during the counseling practicum semester of their graduate studies. First, this paper will discuss the definitions of self-compassion, the benefits of self-compassion, and things to be aware of in beginning self-compassion work. Then, the paper will discuss the needs of beginning counselors with special attention to the practicum semester. Finally, this paper will provide suggestions for the specific ways self-compassion can help CITs progress in their practice and studies with special attention to supervision, attending to clients in session, taking care of oneself after sessions, and how self-compassion could help a CIT in starting their social justice work. In addition to this paper, there will be a handouts and resources to help a CIT begin their self-compassion journey.

Self-Compassion for Counselors-in-Training

Becoming a clinical mental health counselor is a deeply personal process that calls for continual self-reflection, evaluation, and practice, in an effort to produce competent counseling. As a counselor-in-training myself, I experienced several challenges in my practicum semester when I worked with clients for the first time. In the initial stages of my counseling practicum, I experienced feelings of inadequacy and overwhelm in continuing self-reflective practices, acquiring and experimenting with clinical skills, developing a strong supervisory alliance, implementing constructive and supportive feedback, creating a self-care regimen, and stretching my advocacy skills. To cope with these feelings, my instructor suggested I turn to self-compassion: I learned about its concepts and began to practice them. Self-compassion became a source of resilience for me, and I wanted to know more about why self-compassion was so helpful for me, and how it could also help others.

In this exploration of the relationship between self-compassion and the challenges of CITs in practicum, the concept of self-compassion will be discussed first. Then, some suggestions for developing an informed self-compassion practice are outlined, including potential consequences of self-compassion practices for different identities. Next, how to implement self-compassion in counselor training is addressed with special attention to developing self-awareness, improving the supervisory relationship, improving the quality of counseling sessions, refining self-care practices, and enhancing one's commitment to social justice work. Self-compassion may prove helpful in addressing the needs and challenges of CITs in their practicum semester, which may improve their delivery of competent counseling during this time and in the future.

What is Self-Compassion?

Compassion originates from Buddhist traditions, and describes the sentiment of wanting others to be free from suffering and regarding them without judgment. Compassion for others is emphasized in the West, “but in Buddhist psychology, it is believed that it is essential to feel compassion for oneself as it is for others” (Neff, 2003, p.224). The idea of compassion contributes to the Buddhist concept of interdependence – everything and everyone is connected. Over the last few decades, as Eastern philosophies and traditions gained exposure in the West, the concept of compassion and self-compassion has become a focus of many studies in the social sciences. Compassion is a wish for others to be healthy, happy, and well, while self-compassion is that same sentiment directed towards oneself. Neff (2009) has defined self-compassion by breaking it down into three domains: self-kindness, the acknowledgment of common humanity, and the cultivation of mindfulness practices. Neff pairs each element of self-compassion with its antithesis: self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs. isolation, and mindfulness vs. over-identification. Self-kindness is using positive, nurturing, and encouraging self-talk, whereas self-judgment is using negative, critical, and shaming self-talk. The idea that a person’s problems and suffering is part of the human experience supports the notion of common humanity, while believing that a person’s problems are not experienced by anyone else is isolation. The element of mindfulness speaks to the “moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally, as as open-heartedly as possible” (Kabat-Zinn, 2015, p.1). Over-identification occurs when a person begins to identify with their thoughts and feelings, instead of holding them

in nonjudgmental awareness. These three elements of self-compassion, along with their foils, provide some guidance for people who might be beginning their self-compassion practice.

Practicing self-compassion has been shown to improve many dimensions of wellness including emotional and physiological well-being. Self-compassion can improve emotional resilience by disarming one's threat system and activating the caregiving system (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). This means that in times of distress, self-compassion practices can ease feelings of stress and provide feelings of warmth and safety. Self-compassion impacts positive psychological functioning, as higher levels of self-compassion are "negatively associated with self-criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression, and neurotic perfectionism...and positively associated with life-satisfaction, social connectedness, and emotional intelligence" (Neff et al., 2006, pp.140-141). In an effort to prevent oneself from experiencing suffering, people who practice self-compassion regularly may begin to establish routines and behaviors that support their well-being, and in this way self-compassion can encourage proactive behaviors, which can lead to self-kindness throughout life (Neff, 2003). Even though self-compassion practices involve a person being with their suffering in a nonjudgmental and kind way, this type of practice can still produce feelings of discomfort and pain.

Developing an Informed Self-Compassion Practice

Self-compassion in simple terms is being a good friend to yourself. Humans are social beings who are neurobiologically hardwired to show nurturing and care towards members of their social group, whether it be to friends, their families, their communities, or to the world. Humans have evolved attachment dynamics that are responsive to

displays of affection and nurturing, which have allowed for collective survival, and self-compassion is offering those displays of nurturance and care inwards to provide self-to-self relating that resembles self-to-other relating (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). However, many people do not have practice being compassionate toward themselves, and most find it easier to be compassionate towards others and critical towards the self. Self-criticism is the experience of putting oneself down and usually manifests in negative self-talk. Shame is the universal painful, emotional experience of believing oneself to be unworthy, and it turns out that shame and self-criticism are related. Some research indicates that the development of shame, and one's proneness to shame, is influenced by a person's early attachments to caregivers, and self-criticism emerges as a defense response to these early feelings of shame (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). Reframing self-criticism as a safety behavior may offer relief to people who struggle with self-criticism, and potentially light a path forward towards self-compassion.

Self-criticism is a tool that has helped people survive painful and, in some cases, life threatening, experiences. One way that this can manifest is in negative rumination, or replaying negative events or interactions in one's mind repeatedly, coupled with mean thoughts towards oneself. Gilbert and Proctor (2006) suggest that self-criticism and rumination were survival strategies that worked to keep people from repeating real or perceived mistakes that put them in danger. In other words, if people ruminate on painful experiences, they will be able to process exactly what occurred, commit it to memory, and be less likely to repeat that painful experience in the future. When people first start practicing self-compassion, it can feel counter-intuitive, and potentially threatening because self-criticism becomes replaced with self-kindness. When self-criticism is

replaced with self-kindness, negative rumination can transform into reflection, which is a more adaptive form of rumination (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007).

Starting a self-compassion practice may cause feelings of discomfort. When people first start treating themselves with kindness and nurturing, they can be reminded of the times they were not so kind to themselves, or the people in their families, or life, experience who did not unconditionally love them. It can elicit feelings of loss and hurt. Neff calls this “backdraft” as a metaphor for this process. Backdraft is a term used in firefighting, and describes a reaction that occurs when firefighters open a door to a burning building. The rush of air into the fire feeds a larger fire. When people open the door to loving and accepting themselves, it can cause a rush of discomfort and fear, and trigger feelings of unworthiness. Neff advises people who feel this backdraft in their self-compassion practice to stop what they are doing and engage in their most accessible forms of self-care. Temporarily stopping the exercise to take care of oneself is actually the most self-compassionate thing they can do in that instance. As mentioned previously, self-compassion is not an intuitive process. It can feel overwhelming, awkward, incongruent, and just plain wrong. Additionally, self-compassion practices may elicit different consequences for different identities.

Gender and Self-Compassion

Neff has also researched the impact of gender role socialization on the practice of self-compassion. She has further differentiated two kinds of self-compassion: tender and fierce. Tender self-compassion refers to a person’s desire to provide nurturing, empathy, and understanding towards oneself. Neff labels tender self-compassion as using the skills derived from adopting the energy of “yin”. Fierce self-compassion is enacting that self-

love and self-kindness in the world. Neff labels this using the energy of “yang”. The terms yin and yang are from ancient Chinese philosophy, and today are used by Neff as gender-neutral terms for feminine and masculine, respectively. Basically the energy of yin is the energy of receptivity, nurturing, flow, and inaction, and is associated with traditional femininity. Yang is the energy of taking action often associated with traditional masculinity. Because half of the population is socialized as “female”, and the other half is socialized as “male”, there exists norms associated with this gender binary.

People who deviate from the norm are often ostracized, feared, and shamed. This is important in practicing self-compassion because those who feel impacted or restricted by feminine gender norms might face opposition when practicing fierce self-compassion, while those who have been socialized as masculine might face opposition when practicing tender self-compassion. Both tender and fierce self-compassion are not limited to gender; people of all gender identities can practice both aspects of self-compassion. However, we exist in a binary world that seeks to keep people designated to their boxes of “men” and “women”, “masculine” or “feminine”. The truth is that both yin and yang energies exist in every person. The gender binary is perpetuated by enforcing gender norms and keeping people restricted to those norms. This certainly has a negative impact on all genders, however, it’s important to note that those who identify as women, trans, and non-binary may face additional challenges not experienced by those who identify as male or are male presenting. Additionally, the oppressive system of patriarchy works in tandem with the gender binary to elevate men and suppress women, trans, and nonbinary people.

Intersectional Identities and Self-Compassion

Self-compassion inherently supports the wellness of all people, though this concept does not exist in a vacuum - it exists in a world with many systems of oppression. Therefore, the practice of self-compassion will have different consequences for varying identities. These systems include racism, ableism, white supremacy, homophobia and heterosexism, transphobia, xenophobia, classism, fatphobia, ageism, sexism, anti-semitism, elitism, and islamaphobia. These systems are harmful and negatively impact people who belong to one or more oppressed communities on all levels - from the macro to the micro.

When systems of oppression are so powerful, they can become internalized in the individual. Here is where internalized oppressive messaging can impact the practice of self-compassion. For example, a person who identifies as Black, autistic, and queer will face issues in self-compassion practice that someone who identifies as white, neuro-typical, and heterosexual will not. This could look different, for example, in practicing the tenet of “common humanity” vs “isolation”; are the person’s feelings universal, or do they feel they experience them in isolation? Yes, everyone *feels shame*, but not everyone feels shame about *how they identify*. So, a Black individual who identifies as queer and autistic who is struggling with feelings of inadequacy could be potentially dismantling the anti-Blackness, racist, abelist, and homophobic messaging they have received throughout their life. This kind of messaging is not something a white, neuro-typical, and heterosexual person will have to grapple with in their self-compassion practice.

Interestingly, the tenet of common humanity in self-compassion can prove helpful for individuals who belong to one or more marginalized groups. Individuals with

marginalized identities can view their experiences as part of a collective struggle experienced by members of their community because of dominant oppressive systems (Vigna et al., 2020). This idea reframes their experiences as not being caused by personal deficits, but caused by stigma and discrimination. By problematizing the structures, instead of oneself, a great deal of self-kindness and self-compassion can emerge. In fact, some research suggests that self-compassion can be a mitigating factor of stress caused by stigma and discrimination (Chan, et al., 2020).

As mentioned earlier, self-compassion can also look like speaking up for oneself, setting boundaries with others, and advocating for their rights and the rights of others. There are more barriers to self-advocacy for people who belong to oppressed and marginalized communities than to those who receive the benefits and privileges of having the idolized identity/identities. Therefore, practicing fierce self-compassion as someone with an oppressed identity could lead to backlash from their environment, including the systems and people they interact with.

Self-Compassion and Counselor Development

CITs face several issues that align with their stage of counselor development. Though there exists a plethora of research on the developmental concerns of CITs, I am highlighting two specific issues to demonstrate the utility of self-compassion. The two issues CITs face in practicum that I chose to highlight are the pressures to feel effective, and managing the emotional labor of reflective practices.

In practicum, CITs work with clients for the first time. In sessions, first time counselors will be practicing the foundational skills of rapport building such as active listening, providing minimal encouragers, reflecting content and emotions, and asking

open ended questions. Additionally, CITs might be encouraged by supervisors to experiment with using interventions that go beyond rapport building, such as practicing conceptualizing from different theoretical lenses. Although learning and implementing new skills can be an exciting venture, CITs in practicum may feel pressure to be effective in their counseling right away (Young, 2017). CITs who strive to be competent and ethical in their practicum understand the implications of working with real clients with real issues, and want to do right by their clients. This can lead to performance anxiety and feelings of low self-efficacy.

Additionally, as CITs facilitate sessions with clients, they are also implored to keep “a close watch on [their] own tendencies to judge, to boost [their] egos, or to force [their] viewpoints on others” (Young, 2017, p.3). Though becoming aware of biases is a part of the lifelong counselor journey, there may be greater emphasis on this in the earlier stages of counselor development. Because of the heightened awareness of one’s own biases, judgments, and worldviews at this stage, CITs may grapple with fear of causing harm to their clients in this way, which may lead to hesitancy and anxiety in attempting skills like broaching, using process comments, and utilizing challenging techniques.

It is important to address that counselor development does not look the same for everybody. Students bring into their counseling programs not only themselves, but their histories, background, experiences, worldviews, and identities. The counseling journey may present varying challenges (and advantages) in respect to individual differences. Minority CITs could face individualized challenges in their counselor development. People of color (POC), and gender and sexual minorities (GSM), due to institutionalized oppression like racism, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, xenophobia, homophobia,

transphobia, biphobia, and heterosexism, have been harmed in the field of psychology by psychologists and mental health counselors, as cited in the use of conversion therapy with GSM (Haldman, 2022) and psychologists creating mental diseases that perpetuated and justified the enslavement of Black people (Association of Black Psychologists, 2021). Much of this reality has yet to be rectified by the field, and even so, these systems of oppression are still embedded in counselor education (Gonzalez & Cokley, 2021) and show up in required textbook readings, lack of diverse identities in instructor and leadership positions, and majority-centered curriculum and research. Minority students may feel like the spokesperson for their respective identities, and are often the voices that speak up to challenge the -isms in classes, in their practicum locations, and with their instructors, classmates, and supervisors. This is an incredibly heavy burden that white, cisgendered, straight, and majority students do not have to bear. Additionally, minority students are less likely to have the opportunity to interact with students who identify similarly (Young, 2017), whereas majority students can have interactions with students who share similar identities. These obstacles may impact the more general issues of counselor development, like issues of self-efficacy, asking for and receiving support, and feeling confident in one's abilities. Self-compassion may also help with these individualized differences in development, though the challenges they experience are different to students who have majority identities.

One of the core tenets of self-compassion previously mentioned is the idea of common humanity. This is the idea that people are not alone in their suffering. One way that CITs can tap into this tenet is by normalizing the stage of development they are currently in. By being developmentally appropriate in their self-appraisals, CITs will be

able to “focus on the next step ahead and alleviate some of this feeling that [they] should swiftly ascend to a higher level of helping” (Young, 2017, p.12). A self-compassionate affirmation a CIT may say to themselves is, “I am developmentally on track. I have as much knowledge as any other counselor in this stage.” Some reality checking could also be helpful, as Young (2017) reminds beginning counselors that “one cannot master the art of helping in one semester or even 2 years of formal training” (p.12). The process of becoming a licensed clinician is a long one, with many stages. Being aware of the developmental stages, and the challenges associated with each stage can alleviate the pressure to be masterful right away. Without the pressure to be perfect, CITs may give themselves the permission to try more difficult, while appropriate, counseling skills without an intense fear of failure. Young also encourages beginning counselors to “take comfort in the small victories” (p.12) that allude to greater progress. Celebrating what is going *well* is imperative for CITs to gain the confidence to continue their training.

Self-Compassion and Counselor Training: Developing Self-Awareness

One of the cornerstones of counselor training is the call to becoming a reflective practitioner (Young, 2017). CITs are encouraged to develop their self-awareness through reflection of their own thoughts, biases, histories, and feelings. Practicing being reflective is important in counselor training because it “trains one to be open to contemplation, to consider alternative plans of action, to become resourceful, and to be inquisitive in one’s lifestyle as well as in one’s work” (Young, 2017, p.3). Reflection enhances critical thinking skills and helps counselors-in-training deeply process what they are learning and integrate it into their own beliefs (Young, 2017). Reflection is the actionable practice through which self-awareness develops.

Reflection is also important because CITs “will be better able to separate [their] personal prejudices about what seems normal and perhaps look at the situation from an alternate viewpoint” (Young, 2017, p.4). Additionally, reflecting with teachers, classmates, and supervisors enhances perspective taking skills because it allows for more growth through dialogue that may help CITs expand their perspective to include multiple points of view (Young, 2017). The ability to view a situation or problem from multiple perspectives is crucial for delivering competent counseling. CITs are trained to view the client as the expert of their own lives, and as an important collaborator in the counseling process. When CITs practice reflection, they become more aware of their own beliefs, patterns, and perspectives, and are less likely to impose their views on the client or client’s problem, which can lead to the development of a collaborative and strong therapeutic alliance.

Although practicing self-reflection is imperative to counselor development, it can also open the door to self-criticism. Though the practicum experience can be immensely educational and rewarding, the continual evaluation and self-evaluation can contribute to self-criticism, as well as feelings of shame, anxiety, guilt, and overwhelm (Coaston & Lawrence, 2019). Constantly reflecting on one’s life, history, behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and performance can be difficult. CITs become aware of their flaws, unhelpful thoughts, and unhealthy behaviors, which can produce feelings of shame and self-judgment. Self-compassion can make reflection easier in that it provides a framework for one to practice self-awareness with a kind response to shame, judgment, and other overwhelming feelings. Self-compassion may alleviate the emotional toll of reflective practices because of the elements of mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness.

Mindfulness allows a CIT to notice their shortcomings with non-judgmental awareness. CITs recognize, by practicing the element of common humanity, that having shortcomings is part of being human; everyone is flawed and there is no such thing as perfect. Then, CITs can offer themselves compassion by speaking kindly to themselves about their perceived shortcomings, which can lead to self-acceptance and a desire to continue growing and learning.

Self-Compassion and Counselor Training: Supervision

In practicum, counselors in training lean heavily on supervision. Supervisors provide support and guidance for counselors who are refining their rapport building skills, like active listening, providing a warm and nonjudgmental space, and tracking the client. Counselors also practice developing skills beyond rapport building, such as facilitating an intake interview, assessing for crisis, communicating with clients via phone and email, implementing theoretical interventions, ending the counseling relationship with termination, working as part of a clinical team, conceptualizing cases, referring clients to additional resources, and in some cases, diagnosing, as well as delivering and interpreting assessments. CITs work with supervisors to develop these skills, through activities such as role-play exercises, discussions, reading articles, or watching tapes.

These additional clinical skills can present a learning curve for counseling students who may not have had any previous experience working in the mental health field, and who have only practiced the fundamental counseling skills with their classmates. This steep learning curve can cause CITs high levels of stress and anxiety. It is important to note that feelings of anxiety, to a certain degree, are developmentally

appropriate, however, if intense anxiety is not managed, it can negatively impact the supervision working alliance (Mehr et al., 2010).

Feelings of shame, ineffectiveness, and incompetency, as well as intense anxiety and self-criticism that counselors in training may feel in practicum in the face of learning and implementing new skills are strong drivers of behavior. Shame is an emotional and sometimes physically painful experience that can cause people to resort to threat responses. These responses can show up in supervisee disclosure and in receiving feedback.

Issues With Supervisee Disclosure and Receiving Feedback

Although there may be some differences depending on supervisor style, generally, supervisees in practicum bring concerns and questions regarding their clients' cases to their supervisor to discuss how to best proceed. It is often up to the supervisee to prioritize their needs, and verbalize their concerns in their supervision meetings. However, there is a potential for supervisees to hold back in disclosing their concerns because of fears of being perceived as incompetent or ineffective. Even worse, "supervision has the potential to elicit shame because of its evaluative components, the requirement that supervisees expose themselves and their work, and supervisees' inevitable ego investment in the work they are doing" (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019, p.102).

Additionally, students who deal with their own mental health challenges or have a history of painful experiences may feel less motivated to disclose their needs in supervision for fear of being perceived as incapable of providing competent counseling (Zerubavel et al., 2012). These fears are valid and have the potential to diminish a CIT's

self-esteem and increase feelings of shame which could reduce disclosure. Reduced disclosure in supervision, could potentially lead to clients not getting what they need in session.

Ideally, supervisors will be able to watch their supervisee's recorded sessions, though due to a supervisor being involved in different roles, they may not have the time to do so, which could lead to important things being missed. Feelings of embarrassment may cause CITs to not be fully honest about what they do or do not know how to do, and although restricting self-disclosure may alleviate these feelings in the short term, this strategy may not prove helpful to counselors and their clients in the long term.

Another potential consequence of experiencing feelings of shame in supervision is submitting to pressures to defend oneself and “justify [one's] actions rather than [listen]...to critiques and suggestions” (Young, 2017, p.15). Receiving constructive feedback, especially in the beginning stages of counselor development, can be difficult. CITs are devoting their studies and sometimes their lives to becoming a counselor, and a lot can be at stake. Hearing feedback that addresses an area of growth or shortcoming can be a difficult emotional experience that can cause internal conflict.

Self-Compassion, Self-Esteem, Supervisee Disclosure, and Receiving Feedback

For the purposes of promoting self-compassion practice in the area of supervision and the topic of receiving feedback, it is important to distinguish the differences between self-esteem and self-compassion. High self-esteem and self-compassion are both correlated with wellness, though self-compassion may prove more valuable in contributing to a stronger supervision working alliance. While self-compassion is treating oneself with kindness and non-judgment in an effort to alleviate feelings of suffering,

self-esteem is determining one's worth based on ability by "thinking we're good at things that have significance to us" (Neff, 201, p.1).

Because self-esteem is based on our abilities and competency, self-compassion can be more helpful in supervision because it eliminates the pressure to be good at something. Striving for competency is essential for counselor development, however, this could lead to an unrealistic drive for perfection if not met with self-compassion which can have "deleterious effects on their alliances with their supervisors" (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019, p.85). By taking out the need to be perfect, or even completely competent and effective in practicum, there is more room to grow in supervision. Supervisees may find themselves more willing to disclose their shortcomings and issues in counseling, and be better at receiving and integrating feedback.

Self-esteem is one's own measurement of their worth based on ability. Because of this, feedback from others, regardless of it being negative or positive, may have little to no impact. People with low self-esteem may not believe positive feedback because it does not fit into their own perceptions of themselves, and people with high self-esteem "may dismiss negative feedback as unreliable or biased" (Neff, 2011, p.3). Self-compassion allows people to believe that they are inherently worthy because their worth is not dependent on personal achievement or success (Neff, 2011). Because self-compassion offers a more stable source of self-worth, disclosing issues in supervision becomes less charged with anxiety and fear, and receiving feedback feels more objective and realistic.

CITs who practice self-compassion may be more likely to appropriately disclose in supervision because self-compassion lowers fears of failure. It is developmentally appropriate to feel "embarrassment if you are honest about what you do not know or

cannot do” (Young, 2017, p.14) however, even if you do not share your limits of understanding, your clients will still be there assessing your skills, and their opinion matters the most. Not only is self-compassion helpful in forming realistic evaluations of one’s strengths and weaknesses, but it also can help a person admit when they have contributed to the unfolding of a negative event (Breines & Chen, 2007). This means a CIT will be more likely to share how something in session did not go well, as well as share their thoughts on how they may have had a role in what went wrong. They will also be more willing to investigate their contribution to a mistake, unfolding dynamic, or other issues with clients in session. Self-compassion practices increase one’s motivation to improve, so CITs will be better at taking advantage of their supervisor’s expertise and help.

When supervisors dispense their expertise through offering suggestions and providing feedback to supervisees, CITs may be more emotionally equipped to grapple with exposure to their perceived inadequacies because self-compassion acknowledges that having flaws is part of being human (Neff, 2003). When supervisors point out counselor errors in session, a self-compassionate CIT will feel encouraged to implement changes “where needed and ...[rectify] harmful or unproductive patterns of behavior” (Neff, 2003, p.225). Again, this could be due in part to one’s self-worth not being tied to competency or ability. This does not equate to complacency, as one might speculate. In fact, “self-compassion should counteract complacency as long as mindfulness is present” (Neff, 2003, p.225). Some research suggests that a lack of self-compassion leads to less motivation to improve (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion can increase the likelihood of someone acknowledging their flaws and honoring them as part of counselor development.

Then, they can create a plan to make the appropriate changes. This could especially be helpful in watching recorded sessions, alone or with a supervisor, because CITs are literally face to face with their performance.

Self-compassion can help with the supervision relationship because it may increase appropriate supervisee's disclosure, and enhance their ability to withstand receiving feedback. Self-compassion in this way can be seen as an "useful emotional regulation strategy, in which painful or distressing feelings are not avoided but are instead held in awareness with kindness, understanding, and a sense of shared humanity" (Neff, 2003, p.225). When supervisees have effective coping tools and strategies, their alliances with their supervisors benefit (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Self-compassion could be an effective coping resource for a CIT in practicum, and increase the strength of their supervisory alliances.

Self-Compassion and Skill Building

As mentioned previously, rapport building skills are further refined in practicum, as well as experimentation with counseling interventions that expand beyond relationship formation. Certain aspects of counseling emerge as meaningful to both CITs and clients in their sessions. Among these are the themes of emotion, immediacy, and insight (Sackett et al., 2012). **Emotion** refers to a CIT's and client's ability to recognize, name, discuss, and manage feelings that come up in sessions (and after sessions). The notion of **immediacy** entails responding to the here-and-now of what's happening in the session. **Insight** refers to the meaningful realizations that are made in regards to emotions, behaviors, thoughts, and patterns, also known as 'aha' moments. CITs use counseling techniques that elicit these themes in session. CITs who also practice self-compassion,

may be better able to attend to emotions, better able to use appropriate immediacy, and better able to help clients develop insight.

Counselors attend to numerous aspects in the counseling session. Attending to *emotion* in particular, can help counselors and clients collaboratively arrive at the heart of the matter. Humans are emotional beings, and feelings have enormous sway in the way people behave, make decisions, and formulate beliefs. People's abilities to recognize and name their emotions "is related to greater emotion regulation and psychosocial well-being" (Brown, 2022, p.xxii). Additionally, "having the correct words to describe specific emotions makes [people] better able to identify those emotions in others, as well as to recognize and manage the emotional experiences when [they] feel them [themselves]" (Brown, 2022, p.xxii). Although understanding emotions is pivotal to progress made in therapy, many people, including CITs, struggle to accurately label their feelings (Brown, 2022). Counselors can work with clients to develop their emotional literacy, which can lead to a greater understanding of their thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and patterns of operating in the world. To do this, CITs must prepare themselves to "handle a broad range of emotions that clients will experience in session and to be able to stay present with clients while they experience these emotions" (Sackett & Lawson, 2016, p.66). Practicing self-awareness lights a way towards complex emotional understanding, and self-compassion may be the key to developing greater self-awareness in regard to emotions.

Many of the emotions that bring clients to therapy, or that emerge in the course of treatment, are difficult to experience. Self-compassion practice can bring people closer to their difficult emotions. Increased self-compassion enables "more adaptive emotion

regulation” (Inwood & Ferrari, 2018, p.218) by decreasing the likelihood of avoiding negative emotions (Neff, 2003). This may be due to the tenants of mindfulness and common humanity in self-compassion. People with high self-compassion understand that what they feel is a part of the human experience, so they do not need to shame themselves for their emotions, including negative emotions. This attitude towards emotions allows people to *feel* their feelings and even come to address negative emotions with equanimity, and view them as helpful and important (Neff, 2003). When people allow themselves to feel their feelings, instead of suppressing or ignoring them, these feelings can be processed and healed (Findlay-Jones et al., 2015). Self-kindness, another tenet of self-compassion, is helpful in taking care of oneself while and after they have experienced difficult emotions. Mindfulness helps us become aware of our emotions; common humanity helps us normalize and validate our feelings; and self-kindness helps us regard our feelings with kindness and understanding instead of criticism. CITs are tasked with self-awareness practices so that they can better understand their *own* emotions, and eventually name, normalize, and validate the emotions of their clients.

Sometimes attending to emotions in sessions will require that CITs employ the technique of immediacy. Immediacy refers to a counselor's ability to thoughtfully address what is happening in the here and now. There are many ways to use immediacy and many benefits to its usage. Generally, immediacy is when a counselor attempts to disrupt a cycle of being that the client has identified as not being helpful, by calling out a dynamic, feeling, thought, or behavior that is occurring in the moment. One way that immediacy can be used is to implement an appropriate tangible intervention or activity without planning ahead. One other way of using immediacy is in broaching; broaching is a way of

thoughtfully approaching a sensitive subject between counselor and client. Immediacy is also used to discuss the therapeutic relationship and process. Counselors and clients can each share what is working or not working in their relationship. Counselors may also use immediacy to discuss a dynamic occurring in session that mirrors the client's life outside of therapy. The skill of immediacy in any of these ways may require a higher level of confidence in one's abilities. For CITs, using immediacy may feel scary and vulnerable. Self-compassion practices can act as a protective factor for engaging in healthy risk taking, which can apply to CITs experimenting with immediacy.

Self-compassion can support the application of immediacy with the tenets of mindfulness and self-kindness. First, it takes mindfulness to be fully aware of the present moment in session which is a prerequisite to immediacy. Additionally, a good deal of non-judgment towards oneself is needed to use this skill so that the counselors can work to use language that is sensitive and appropriate. Since immediacy can approach some sensitive subjects, it may be possible that a CIT says something that, at best, is incongruent, and at worst, is harmful to the client. Because of this possibility there may be some anxiety in trying out this skill for the first time for fear of failure with its delivery. Self-compassion helps alleviate fear of failure because self-compassion recognizes that failure is a part of life, and experienced by everyone. The normalization of failure releases the tension of being perfect in a CIT's use of immediacy. CITs may be willing to even try delivering an activity without planning ahead of time or invite a conversation about their counseling relationship. Self-compassion takes the fear out of striking when the iron's hot. When counselors use immediacy by "just saying things out

loud” clients can experience “lightbulb moments” or moments of insight (Sackett & Lawson, 2016, p.66).

Insight occurs when a realization or connection is made by the counselor or the client. Insight can be precipitated by many techniques (Sackett & Lawson, 2016) and is often facilitated by self-awareness. Clients build self-awareness by reflecting and processing feelings with their counselor. Self-awareness can bring about insight by shedding light on: potential meaning behind past events, how one may be contributing to an unhealthy pattern, noticing that there is even a pattern to begin with, making connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, how beliefs, biases, and worldviews are underscoring fears, attitudes, behaviors, or other feelings, and so much more. One cannot practice self-awareness without self-compassion. Self-awareness can include people becoming aware of their flaws and shortcomings, which can open the door to self-criticism. Self-compassion understands that flaws are part of what makes us human, and therefore protects people from feelings of shame and unworthiness. Self-compassion offers a kind and nonjudgmental way of practicing self-awareness so that when a person eventually rubs up against a perceived inadequacy, they meet themselves with understanding and compassion. With self-compassion, uncovering insight can feel liberating, as opposed to criticizing.

Self-Compassion and Self-Care

One of the greatest predictors of progress in therapy is a strong therapeutic alliance between counselor and client. Clients value a “present, engaged, and nonjudgmental” counselor who understands and accepts them (Sackett & Lawson, 2016, p.63). CITs, therefore, must not only focus their counselor development on acquisition of

technical skills, but also on their personhood and growth as a human being as this helps improve their interpersonal skills as well. Because a strong counseling relationship is so important, and so highly valued by both CIT and client, CITs, and really counselors throughout their careers must “continue self-care and seek ongoing personal growth” (Sackett & Lawson, 2016, p.68). Luckily, self-compassion can help with this too!

The American Counseling Association (2014) has written into the Code of Ethics the need for “counselors [to] engage in self-care activities to maintain and promote their own emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being to best meet their professional responsibilities” (p.8). For counselors to be able to perform their many responsibilities ethically and competently, they must engage in practices that promote their well-being. Many of the foundational formations of self-care practices begin in a CIT’s graduate studies. In order to commit oneself fully to their studies in counselor training, graduate students must strengthen their self-care practices. Self-compassion practices may enhance CIT self-care after their sessions by decreasing negative rumination and feelings of burnout.

As mentioned previously, rumination was once an adaptive behavior that enabled humans to learn from their mistakes so they could, quite literally, survive. Rumination is the repeating of events or thoughts in one’s head that can lead to feelings of anxiety, shame, and guilt. A CIT may experience rumination after a session in which they said something that they regret. For example, a CIT may regret inaccurately reflecting their client’s emotions and replay the interaction long after the session has ended. This rumination can also be coupled with self-criticism. Here’s how employing the three tenets of self-compassion here can disrupt this negative rumination cycle. The first tenet

to enact would be the idea of mindfulness vs over-identification. Nonjudgmentally noticing that one is replaying an event or interaction can help a CIT become the observer of their thoughts, instead of stuck in them. The next tenet one could employ would be the idea of common humanity, or reminding oneself that making mistakes is human nature, and that even seasoned counselors inaccurately reflect emotions. Lastly, CITs can start to replace self-criticism with self-kindness. They can do this in a number of ways, and a good place to start might be with asking oneself what they need. Using self-compassion not only can disrupt negative rumination, but it can also lead to a path forward to greater self-awareness. With less emotional reactivity, CITs will be able to investigate, either by themselves or with the help of their supervisor, what occurred to lead to the mistake. Then CITs can make the necessary adjustments to avoid to their best ability making an inaccurate reflection with this client in the future, or make a plan with how to address, perhaps with immediacy, when they are not understanding the client while in session.

Self-compassion can also be helpful in dealing with feelings of burnout in the counseling profession. The counseling profession presents unique emotional challenges because “therapists listen to the painful experiences of others all day long” which can lead to “empathic distress,...stress and burnout” (Neff, 2022, p.58). Humans are “hardwired to feel the emotions of others” (Neff, 2022, p.58) and CITs are encouraged to use this hardwiring in an attempt to better understand the emotions and motivations of their clients. Self-compassion not only helps reduce empathy burnout, but also improves empathy skills (Coaston & Lawrence, 2019). The self-compassion tenet at play here is the one of mindfulness vs overidentification. CITs can become nonjudgmentally aware of their feelings and the feelings of their clients without engaging in feelings of pity for

themselves or their clients. Compassion can easily turn into pity if mindfulness is not engaged.

When counselors practice self-compassion, their clients benefit because “if therapists are compassionate toward their own empathic pain, not only will they be less distressed, but their compassion will be felt by clients through emotional attunement” (Neff & Germer, 2022, p.58). In fact, if counselors-in-training practice self-compassion consistently, their efforts will show up in the counseling room because “exposure to a therapist with a self-compassionate presence is likely to change how clients think and feel about themselves” (Neff & Germer, 2022, p.58). Self-compassion has the power to literally change people’s lives by implementing a more kind, nonjudgmental way of being.

Self-Compassion and Social Justice

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics Preamble identifies promoting social justice as one of the “core professional values of the counseling profession” (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014, p.3). Social justice in the counseling context is “the promotion of equity for all people and groups for the purpose of ending oppression and injustice affecting clients, students, counselors, families, communities, schools, workplaces, governments, and other social and institutional systems” (ACA, 2014, p.21). Mental health counselors adopt this value into their counseling, and many begin their social justice work in their graduate training programs, and in their practicum semester. Social justice work is rooted in compassion, as compassion is wanting others to be free from suffering. Too many people and groups have endured suffering due to oppressive systems embedded in our culture. In counselor

training, CITs may naturally experience increased compassion for others as they learn more about the ways societal systems contribute to the development of mental health issues and disorders of individuals, families, and groups. This natural development of compassion, however, may be enhanced with the addition of self-compassion practices. Self-compassion may help by alleviating feelings of powerlessness, mobilizing feelings of guilt, and increasing motivation to engage in advocacy and social justice work.

As a CIT begins to become more aware of how societal institutions and systems impact mental health, they may experience feelings of overwhelm, defeat, and powerlessness. Societal and cultural change is hard to achieve, and is often a painfully slow process. CITs in practicum may work with clients that experience mental health challenges in part due to systems of oppression embedded in our culture. CITs may offer validation of client experiences and feelings, and provide information, interventions, and resources that empower their client, but at the same time feel powerless to completely relieve clients from societal sources of distress. For CITs who care deeply about the well-being of their client, this can feel like a vulnerable position to be in. This vulnerability may manifest in feelings of anger, frustration, despair, grief, and helplessness. Self-compassion may help CITs grapple with these feelings in a way that is effective for their client. Self-compassion allows practitioners to be with their suffering, and nonjudgmentally attend to their pain. When CITs practice self-compassion, they improve their emotion regulation, which in this case may look like: using anger as a tool to motivate learning more ways to advocate for their client, offering oneself self-kindness while experiencing grief about the objective reality of oppression in our world, and

alleviating feelings of powerlessness by increasing motivation to use their privileges to enact change in their communities.

CITs who have a privileged identity/identities may begin to feel guilty about the unearned advantages they have received in their lives (Chan et al., 2018). Guilt, however painful, may prove helpful in motivating a CIT to use their privileges for the good of their clients when self-compassion practices are added, as self-compassion helps people see the utility in even negative emotions. Additionally, as self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation, counselors who practice self-compassion will feel more called to activate feelings of guilt as a driving force for rectifying behavior.

Self-compassion can help a CIT increase their feelings of compassion and non-judgment towards others (Neff, 2003). As CITs direct nonjudgment, kindness, and nurturing inwards, the more likely they will begin to direct those feelings outwards. CITs who practice self-compassion begin to forgive themselves (while still holding themselves accountable) for past transgressions because they understand that making mistakes and experiencing failure is part of life, and part of being human. Furthermore, they may begin to develop insight into the cultural conditioning that led to their failures, mistakes, and problematic behavior. The process that led to insights made about the self may increase a CIT's ability to gain insight into the causes and conditions that led to the behaviors and problems of their clients. They can begin to understand that everyone is a product of the culture, and accusations towards the individual can transform into critiques of the culture. Compassion can look like shifting judgment towards the individual to judgment towards oppressive systems. CITs can start problematizing the oppressive systems, instead of

pathologizing individuals, which can increase motivation to rectify the issues in our society.

Conclusion and Resource

For counselors-in-training, the practicum semester presents new challenges in counselor development that can lead to transformation and growth. If challenges are met with self-compassion, CITs may expect to experience advances in self-awareness, improved supervisory alliances, increased ability to attend to clients in session, expanded self-care practices, and more motivation to begin or continue their social justice and advocacy work. Practicing self-compassion may facilitate more growth for counselor development in practicum, and this bodes well for assisting clients throughout their professional careers.

Appendix A contains resources that may help CITs increase their self-compassion during their practicum semester. The following handouts provide resources that support a CIT in developing the three tenets of self-compassion: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness.

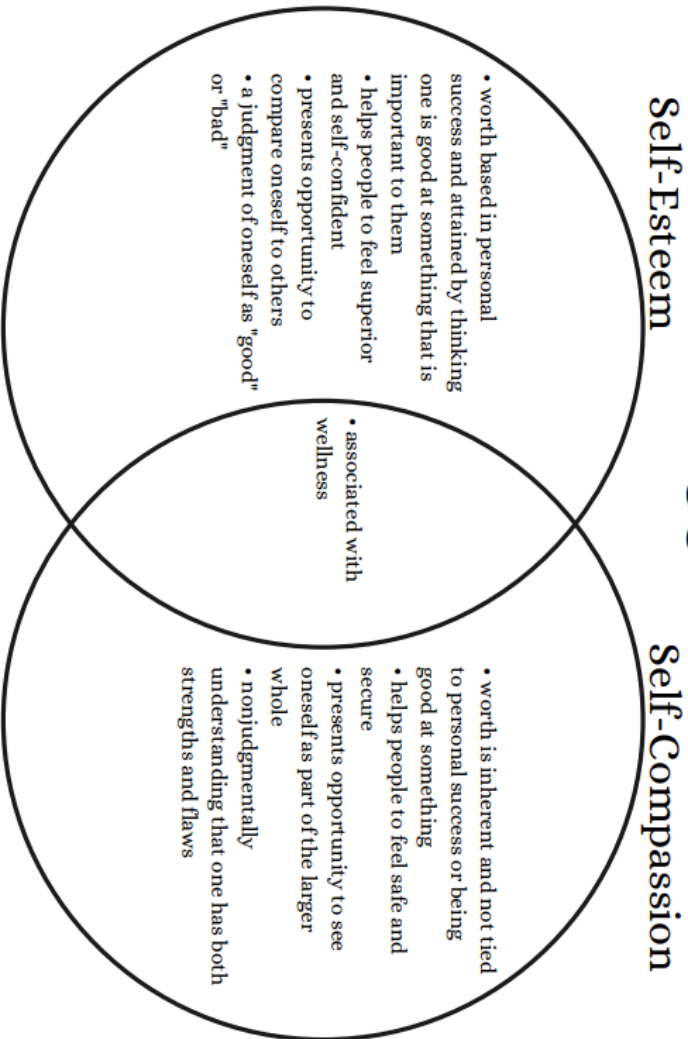
APPENDIX A

The following pages are intended to be handouts that assist CITs in their beginning self-compassion journey. The handouts include a visual aid comparing self-esteem and self-compassion, QR codes to self-compassion practices, QR codes to culturally responsive mindfulness practices (mindfulness being a tenet of self-compassion), helpful self-compassion affirmations for CITs, a visual aid comparing tender and fierce self-compassion, and the myths of self-compassion.

The following handouts may be helpful regardless of the order in which they are used. CITs may use the resources on their own, or with their colleagues and supervisors. Supervisors may provide these handouts to their supervisees to help increase their supervisees' level of self-compassion, which could, in turn, improve the strength of the supervisory relationship. The purpose of these handouts is to be educational and to inspire one to learn more about self-compassion practices.

The first handout compares self-esteem and self-compassion, which outlines some of the differences between these two concepts. This handout can be helpful to CITs who determine their worth based upon their accomplishments and achievements. The concept of self-compassion offers a more stable sense of self-worth since one's worth is inherent, and not predicated by successes and failures.

Comparing Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion



Adapted from: Neff, (2011), Self-Compassion, Self-Esteem, and Well-Being. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 5(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00330.x>

The following handout is a list of three self-compassion guided meditation resources, with a QR code that will link someone to directly to the resource. This handout can be a helpful introduction to self-compassion meditations since each is relatively short in duration and has a guiding narration. CITs can implement these meditations as part of their self-care regimen to increase their self-compassion.

Self-Compassion Guided Meditations



The Rain of Self-Compassion

This 11-minute guided meditation is led by Tara Brach, a clinical psychologist, meditation teacher, and founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, D.C.

Self-Compassion Guided Practices

This is a list of 18 downloadable guided practices created by Dr. Kristin Neff, a self-compassion researcher and author. Neff is also an Associate Professor in the Educational Psychology Dept. at the University of Texas at Austin.



Self-Compassion Break

This 6-minute guided meditation is led by Dr. Chris Germer, a clinical psychologist, author, researcher, and co-creator of the Mindful Self-Compassion training program.

The following handout is a list of three culturally responsive mindfulness resources with QR codes that direct someone to the resource. Mindfulness is a core tenet of self-compassion, and can increase someone's self-compassion. The resources in this handout offer meditations and resources for people of all identities. This handout can be helpful for CITs of color, CITs with a sexual or gender minority identity, CITs who identify with one or more marginalized groups, and CITs who identify as an aspiring ally or accomplice.

Culturally Responsive Mindfulness Resources



Liberate App

This meditation app offers guided practices designed for Black people and the Black experience. Meditations are created and led by BIPOC individuals.

Insight Timer App

This meditation app offers hundreds of guided meditations and practices, talks, workshops, and other resources. Insight Timer provides playlists of resources designed to address the experiences of many marginalized populations.










Center for Healing Racial Trauma

The Center for Healing Racial Trauma has developed two mindfulness meditations: The Black Lives Matter Meditation for Healing Racial Trauma and The Ally + Accomplice Meditation for Cultivating an Anti-Racist Mindset.

The following handout offers seven self-compassion affirmations that speak to some of the issues that CITs face in their practicum semester. The affirmations are meant for CITs to tap into the common humanity and self-kindness tenets of self-compassion and may help CITs improve the quality of their practicum semester.

Self-Compassion Affirmations for Counselors-in-Training



-  Making mistakes is part of the process.
-  I can circle back to make a repair with my client.
-  There is no such thing as a perfect counselor or a perfect session.
-  I take care of myself and my emotions.
-  I deserve to seek the assistance I need.
-  All counselors were once a beginner.
-  Making mistakes offers me opportunities to grow.

The following handout outlines some of the differences between tender and fierce self-compassion. CITs can use this handout as a resource to guide which self-compassion practices may be more appropriate for them depending upon the action they feel inspired to take.

Self-Compassion



Tender

- "being with" ourselves
- accepting ourselves
- being present with difficult emotions
- reassuring ourselves
- remembering we're not alone
- self-soothing and nurturing

Fierce

- "acting in the world"
- protecting ourselves
- drawing boundaries
- advocating for ourselves
- fighting injustice
- motivating ourselves

Adapted from: Neff, Kristin. (2022). *What is fierce self-compassion?*. Self-Compassion. <https://self-compassion.org/fierce-self-compassion/>

The following handout outlines the five myths of self-compassion. This handout can be helpful for CITs who experience barriers to beginning their self-compassion journey based on misconceptions about this concept. CITs can use this resource to identify their own beliefs about self-compassion, and then decide to claim them or reframe them.

The 5 Myths of Self-Compassion



1

MYTH: Self-compassion is self-pity

TRUTH: Self-compassion helps us acknowledge and accept difficult feelings

2

MYTH: Self-compassion is a form of weakness

TRUTH: Self-compassion is a source of resilience, and can be used as a coping tool

3

MYTH: Self-compassion is narcissistic

TRUTH: Self-compassion helps us understand that all humans, including ourselves, are imperfect

4

MYTH: Self-compassion makes people complacent

TRUTH: Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation and personal accountability

5

MYTH: Self-compassion is selfish

TRUTH: Self-compassion expands our capacity to be empathetic towards others

Adapted from: Neff, Kristin. (2015, September/October). *The 5 myths of self-compassion*. Psychotherapy Networker. <https://tinyurl.com/2p8uzrhh>

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