

# Mindfulness, Self-Compassion, and Resilience

by Linda Graham, LMFT

Resilience is an innate capacity in the brain that allows us to face and deal with the challenges and crises that are inevitable to the human condition. It allows us to respond flexibly to external events, even those that are upsetting, disturbing, and stressful. It also influences our response to internal perceptions or schemas we have about those events, and how we see ourselves in relation to those events.

The prefrontal cortex is responsible for the broad range of cognitions known as executive function in the brain. We rely on it to regulate the body and the nervous system, quell the fear response of the amygdala, manage a broad range of emotions, attune to ourselves and to other people, empathize with ourselves and other people, develop self-awareness, and *respond flexibly*, i.e., shift gears, shift perspectives, and shift behaviors when necessary (Neurobiologist and mindfulness expert, Daniel Siegal, M.D. was among the first to attribute flexible responding to the prefrontal cortex.)

A mature prefrontal cortex allows us to analyze, plan, make judgments, discern options and make wise choices. This region of the brain develops as a result of our interactions with other people. We learn from others how to regulate our reactivity when we are startled, frightened, frustrated, worried, confused, to perceive whether we are in danger, or whether we are safe in connection with another human being. We also learn from our interactions, how to calm ourselves down as well as how to activate and motivate ourselves when necessary. We learn to attune to ourselves and to others by being attuned to by others.

The development and maturation of the prefrontal cortex is kindled in our earliest interactions with our first primary caregivers, typically our family of origin. Infants learn how to regulate their emotions by the emotions of their parents. Similarly, they learn that they have value and worth because the parents relate to them as valuable and worthy. They also learn to trust their competency in relationships by being related to in resonant, predictable ways. When these interactions go well, the infant, and later, toddler, and older child learns to be resilient, e.g., when he or she handles a disappointment in school or has difficulty playing with other children. With support and resources, he or she can even

bounce back from a potential disaster like a parent becoming gravely ill or parents divorcing.

If these early interactions, and subsequently, the initial conditioning and wiring of the brain's neural circuitry have not gone so well, the developing child's patterns of coping can become defensive, rigid, and closed to new experiences, new people, new emotions, and new learning. Psychologist Bonnie Badenoch refers to this lack of flexibility as "neural cement." Alternatively, the developing child's patterns of coping lack stability, wherein the sense of self remains amorphous, inchoate, and their ability to cope, chaotic or volatile. The brain, in this case, is too flexible, and Dr. Badenoch's terms, a "neural swamp."

However, resilience can be *learned* as the growing child has interactions with other people such as siblings, peers, teachers, coaches, romantic partners, therapists, and spiritual teachers. A fully mature prefrontal cortex, the "CEO" of resilience, is the best buffer we have against stress, trauma, and later psychopathology.

Psychotherapy offers many tools and techniques, through many modalities, to strengthen the functioning of the prefrontal cortex and thus our capacities of resilience. The focus of this article is on the practices of mindfulness and self-compassion, two powerful agents of brain change well documented in research, that allow us to rewire our brains in ways that are safe, efficient, and effective. Both practices help us create the shift in our brains that help us make a shift in our responses to both personal suffering and suffering that we experience as part of the collective human condition.

Mindfulness simply brings *awareness* to our experience; an awareness of what is actually happening, as well as how we react to it. Self-compassion brings *acceptance* to our experience; an acceptance of what is actually happening, as well as our reaction to it.

Mindfulness and self-compassion accomplish this shift in the functioning of the brain in two very different ways. Self-compassion involves bottom-up processing, i.e., body-based and emotion-based practices that shift the focus of the brain from our automatic survival responses or the automatic negativity bias of the brain and into a more open, receptive brain state. This receptive brain state then allows us to shift behaviors.

Mindfulness involves top-down processing, i.e., conscious awareness and reflection that leads to wise choices and wise action. With mindfulness, our focused attention on what is happening and our reactions to the same shifts the focus of the brain from its default network that is responsible for worry and rumination. The default mode of processing can hinder wise coping and effort by getting us mired in memory after memory that leads to even more upset and suffering. Mindfulness, i.e., paying attention to our experience in the moment, moment after moment, facilitates the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, the structure of the brain we use most for self-awareness, for regulating the revving up and the shutting down of the nervous system, to quell the fear response of the amygdala, as well as for response flexibility, coping, good judgment, planning and decision making, and wise action and resilience.

When we are mindful,

- We pause and become present: We come out of distraction, dissociation, and denial. We show up and engage with the experience of the moment.
- We notice and name our experience: Labeling our experience activates the language centers of the brain and our higher conscious brain is online.
- We step back, disentangle from the experience, and reflect on it, cultivating a witness awareness.
- We can then, if we choose, monitor our experience and modify it. We can begin to make choices about how to respond to this experience.
- We practice shifting our perspectives, even knowing that we have a perspective.
- This allows us to truly discern options and even the potential consequences of our options.
- Then we can indeed choose wisely; we can let go of the unwholesome and cultivate the wholesome.

Self-compassion operates differently. When we pay attention to ourselves as the *experiencer* of the experience and bring kind, loving awareness to ourselves, we activate the care-giving system in the brain. This process activates the release of oxytocin, the hormone that is the immediate antidote to the stress hormone cortisol. Oxytocin puts the brakes on the body-brain's automatic survival responses of fight-flight-freeze or shutting down, numbing out, collapsing, and allows the brain to re-open into a larger perspective, a bigger picture where we can reliably, realistically, and reasonably create a shift.

Compassion is one of a dozen positive, pro-social emotions that have been studied by behavioral scientists as well as neuroscientists for the last 20 years, along with gratitude, kindness, generosity, joy, awe, delight, and love. Self-compassion is especially potent because it activates the care-giving system and moves us to act, care, and protect. Researchers have found that daily practices of these positive, pro-social emotions have many benefits, a few among which are:

- Less stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness
- More friendships, social support, collaboration
- Shift in perspectives, more optimism
- More creativity, productivity
- Better health, better sleep
- Longer lives, by 7-9 years, on average

Resilience is a direct outcome of these practices. More compassion leads to more resilience.

In therapy, we cultivate the capacities of self-reflection, the observing ego, and the witness awareness as essential tools of therapeutic change. Whether we call it mindfulness or not, we ask our clients, “What are you noticing now?” When there is a shift in body posture, an upwelling of an emotion, an opening to a new area of inquiry, or a resistance to an area of inquiry, we ask them to pause and notice, and reflect on their experience, thus taking the time for any shifts or any insights to appear. This practice can often lead to meta-awareness, i.e., being aware of their awareness itself. Awareness is essential to being able to shift perspectives and views, notice that we have a perspective in the first place and a belief that is filtering our perception. Awareness, therefore, allows us to choose a response.

Awareness, conscious, intention reflection, is essential for the brain to do its rewiring, to shift old views, old perspectives, and create new views, new perspectives. The brain learns from experience. We learn from reflecting on that experience.

Richard Davidson, whose Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has generated much of the data demonstrating the impacts of mindfulness and compassion practices on brain structure and brain functioning, says, “*The brain is shaped by experience. And because we have a choice about what experiences we want to use to shape the brain, we have a responsibility to choose the experiences that will shape the brain toward the wise and the wholesome.*”

In therapy we use mindfulness to pause, notice, step back and reflect, then to monitor and modify our behaviors, to shift perspectives and discern what our options might be. We help clients choose the experiences that will shift the functioning of the brain and their coping behaviors toward the wise and the wholesome.

In therapy we use the practices of compassion and self-compassion, our compassion and caring, our attunement and empathy for the client, and their self-compassion and caring, their self-attunement and self-empathy, to cultivate self-acceptance. Self-acceptance is what puts the brakes on the shame attacks, the panic attacks, the rage attacks, and allows the clients to come into a larger, broader perspective again, to be resilient.

Carl Rogers said 50 years ago, “The curious paradox is, when I accept myself exactly as I am, then I can change.”

The Mindful Self-Compassion phrases, which I teach in my clinical sessions, create the space for that shift into self-acceptance:

May I be kind to myself in this moment.

May I accept this moment exactly as it is.

May I accept myself in this moment, exactly as I am.

May I give myself all the compassion I need.

Self-compassion is the most powerful tool for self-acceptance. With mindfulness and self-compassion together, the outcome is the client’s self-awareness, self-acceptance, learning and growth, change and resilience.