This talk was given by Miranda Stephens on the 2016 International Women’s Day at the invitation of the Leven Regional Arts Group

Self-Compassion

* I’ve chosen to speak on self-compassion today, not the sort that leads to me have the extra piece of cake, skip the gym or take the easy way out as we all tend to do from time to time, but the sort that can really change how we connect with others and enable us to have a happier and more peaceful life.
* I chose this topic because when I teach my Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Courses, participants (and 90-95% of them are women) invariably disclose that too often they meet the physical, mental or emotional pain within themselves with criticism, meanness or a sense of failure. These negative narratives within our own minds can become patterns of stressful and destructive self-blame which just adds to the misery. We can be so horrible to ourselves in our own minds, thinking things we would never dream of saying to others. Of course some of us do this more often or more severely than others.
* Kristen Neff (who is an international expert on self-compassion, spending her days writing books, researching and conducting workshops on the topic – psychologists’ jobs can be quite interesting or quite weird, depending on how you look at it!) defines self- compassion as having 3 elements:

1) self-kindness rather than self-judgment – so being understanding and caring with ourselves rather than harshly critical

2) a sense of common humanity versus isolation – so recognizing that **all** humans are imperfect, fail and make mistakes. As a side issue, this understanding of common humanity is a type of wisdom that increases with age, which might explain why we may become more self-compassionate as we mature.

3) mindfulness rather than over-identification – so seeing our present moment experience in a clear and balanced manner rather than over-identifying or exaggerating the negative aspects of ourselves or our life.

* With this definition (being kind rather than judgmental in our thoughts and deeds, accepting that we are imperfect but not overemphasizing the negatives), compassion can be extended to ourselves when suffering occurs through no fault of our own, when the circumstances of life are difficult to bear. But also when suffering stems from our own mistakes, failures or inadequacies (our human-ness).
* Self-compassion is being viewed in the health field as increasingly important for our wellbeing and it’s currently a hot topic for research with publications in the area doubling from 2012 to 2013 and they’ve continued to grow since then.
* One of the most consistent findings in the research is the strong link between low levels of self-compassion and depression, anxiety and stress.
* We know that people who are higher in self-compassion tend to have less extreme reactions, less negative emotions, a greater tendency to put their problem into perspective, and are less likely to ruminate about problems.
* Self-compassion is directly associated with psychological strengths such as happiness, optimism, wisdom, personal initiative and emotional intelligence.
* For many people, the road to improvement, getting things done and learning is to encourage ourselves and others to “suck it up”, “harden up” and use criticism to motivate behaviour change, with other approaches seen as being “too soft”. Interestingly however, the research indicates that people who motivate themselves with self-compassion rather than self-criticism:
* are more optimistic and happier with their lives
  + - * are more connected to others and suffer less social comparison
      * enjoy the process of change and working hard towards it
      * have a natural joy of learning and take more pleasure in the process
      * are less likely to procrastinate
      * are able to take feedback and responsibility for their actions
      * are able to use setbacks as a way of connecting to goals
      * Last year Kristen Neff published a study which examined all the research around self-compassion and found that there is a gender difference. Women are less self-compassionate than men (it probably didn’t take the research to tell us that!). This may explain the higher incidence of depression among women compared with men.
      * While we don’t really know why there’s a gender difference, we can hypothesize that it’s because we are often assigned the roles of caregivers in society, and/or that feminine gender-role norms emphasize nurturance and self-sacrifice – to prioritize the needs of others over our own, all of these which may impact on our ability to give ourselves self-compassion.
      * I rather think it is a shame that for many of us this capacity to be compassionate towards others doesn’t carry over into how we relate to ourselves. Especially because self-compassion helps prevent stress and burnout in care-givers of all types.
      * **However**, maybe because we are “compassion experts” when it comes to giving it to others, we may be able to access it for ourselves even easier than men? When Kristen Neff trains people to become more self-compassionate, she asks people to consider “how would you treat a close friend in these circumstances?” That can be an easier question for some of us and a stepping stone to being kinder to ourselves.
      * Because after all, the great news is that we CAN develop a more compassionate and soothing relationship with ourselves. Self-compassion is a skill that we can learn, practice and develop. By how we treat ourselves in thought, word and deed. It means we have to notice how we relate to ourselves, work on it and give it time to change. But maybe it’s worth it. All relationships that are important take time and effort. This relationship we have with ourselves is an important as the relationships we have with others. It influences the relationships we have with others.
      * So my question on International Women’s Day is, can we respond to ourselves and hold our own pain with the same compassion and kindness that we would meet and hold that of a loved one?

I’d like to finish with a Chinese fable that I think speaks to this topic so beautifully. It’s called “The Cracked Pot”.

Thank you very much

References:

McGonigal, The Neuroscience of Change, 2012

Neff, K (2015) Meta-Analysis of gender differences in Self-Compassion

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