

Loving Pain

On or off the cushion, we can approach our painful feelings—physical or emotional—with an attitude of warm-hearted compassion.

By [*Bodhipaksa*](#)

It may seem utterly counterintuitive to turn toward pain. Our evolved instincts are to avoid or to flee it. Yet [mindfully accepting our painful feelings](#) is an essential prerequisite to supporting ourselves with kindness and compassion. Accepting our pain means being willing to be present with it, not pushing it away or reacting to it.

When we observe painful feelings, we needn't do so in a way that's cold and clinical. We can work against our inherent tendency to resist painful feelings by encouraging ourselves to remain open to them. We can approach these feelings in a spirit that's warm, supportive, and loving. In practicing self-compassion, we recognise that there is a part of us that is suffering, and give it our support and our love.

We can be curious about emotional pain as we might be curious with any other sensation in the body—we can look to see what a particular feeling is like and notice exactly where in the body it takes place. We can observe what size it is, what volume of physical space it occupies, or what texture it has. (Perhaps it will feel heavy or dark. Some people observe a colour associated with the feeling, although if this doesn't happen naturally then don't strive to make it happen; just be present with whatever is arising. Perhaps there may be a sense of tension or pressure or movement associated with it. Labelling our feelings can very useful too—naming them as anxiety, or sadness, or disappointment, for example—although it's fine if we can't put names to them.)

Something that can help us to practice acceptance of our pain is to recognise that our feelings are only ever pleasant or unpleasant, and never right or wrong. This is something that Buddhist psychology strongly emphasises. Feelings are non-volitional and ethically neutral; they are not choices we make and so they don't have any moral significance. Only how we think, speak, and act in response to them is [ethically significant](#). You

need not be ashamed of any feeling you experience. You feel what you feel. Simply accepting this is in itself a profound act of [self-compassion](#).

We may need to offer ourselves reassurance as we turn toward painful feelings. We can say things like, “It’s alright to feel pain. It’s OK to feel this. Let me feel this.” This encouragement helps us build up our confidence, and it also takes up some of the mental bandwidth that might otherwise be occupied by reactive thinking. Turning toward our pain gets easier with practice. Gradually, we become less afraid of our discomfort.

Once we’ve recognised that a painful situation has arisen, dropped the story, and turned our attention mindfully and courageously toward our painful feelings, we can begin to offer ourselves support and encouragement. We can do this through adopting an inner gaze of kindness and warmth, talking to ourselves in a loving way, and touching, reassuringly, the area where feelings are manifesting.

You know what it’s like to be looked at by someone who is kind and reassuring—how nourishing, comforting, and encouraging it can be when we are compassionately acknowledged in that way. You also know what it’s like to be on the other side of that gaze—to look with love. We all have that ability. We can learn to regard our pain with a warm-hearted gaze—not, of course, with the eyes but with our inner awareness—offering kindness in that way.

We can also talk to ourselves as we might talk to a friend who was suffering: “I just want you to know I’m here for you. I know you’re in pain, and I care about you. I want you to be free from suffering.” Expressions of support and solidarity such as these are deeply healing. Just as you might physically comfort a hurt child or frightened animal, or offer a comforting and supportive touch to a friend who is suffering, you can lay a gentle hand on the part of the body where the painful feelings are most prominent, touching that area with compassion. Combining all three of these approaches—a kindly gaze, kind words, and kindly touch—can be especially effective at offering ourselves reassurance.

I think we all go through a phase when we think of self-compassion as some kind of “trick” we can use to rid ourselves of an uncomfortable feeling. We see pain as something “bad” that’s inside of us, and we’d like to evict it. If we try to do this, or even just have this attitude, then we’re

still caught up in reacting to our pain. In fact, if we're trying to use self-compassion as a way to get rid of our pain, then it's not really compassion we're practicing, but fear and aversion. At some point, we start to recognise that we're sneakily trying to resist our pain, and we begin to let go into genuine acceptance.

We offer kindness to our pain not to banish it, but simply because it needs kindness, reassurance, and support. Compassion is the most appropriate response to pain, whether it's physical or mental, ours or someone else's. If you were taking care of a baby who was frightened and crying, you wouldn't yell at it, tell it not to be stupid, or regard it as a failure. After all, it's just expressing its distress in the only language it knows. Responding out of fear or aversion would just make its suffering worse. All of us have this fearful, child-like aspect as part of our being. We can't escape it, and treating it unkindly just creates more suffering for us, but we can learn to show it love.

Although I've said that we shouldn't practice self-compassion out of a desire to make pain go away, if we're offering genuine compassion to our pain, then in some cases it will in fact quickly disappear. Many times I have found myself upset, practiced self-compassion, and have found that I'm no longer in distress, all within the space of a few moments. But there also have been times in my life—for example at times of bereavement—when I've lived with painful feelings that have persisted on and off for days, weeks, or even months. Painful feelings pass in their own time, and for as long as they're with us we need to keep offering them support and love. Wanting to get rid of them has been profoundly unhelpful, and has only served to intensify my pain. During times of chronic distress, I've found that I simply had to keep turning back toward those painful feelings over and over again until whatever crisis I was experiencing had passed.

Once we've practiced by turning toward our pain and offering it care, we often find that things shift radically. The sacred pause of mindful compassion becomes a conduit for wisdom and other inner resources that we sometimes aren't aware we had.



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