

# BUILDING COMPASSION THIS EXAM SEASON

## IN COLLABORATION WITH PREVIOUS WARWICK STUDENT, IONA CRAIG



*With the stresses of exam season upon us, **Iona explores the concept of compassion** and how it can be applied to revision and exams or other times of stress.*

Incoherent messages can make exam season even more perplexing than it already is. Teachers' words from GCSE times come forward; if you fail your career is over. There's pressure from parents and peers or maybe just yourself to reach a targeted grade or just pass at all. Then social media pipes up about self-care and taking a bath otherwise you'll burn out. And you're left not sure whether you should be revising instead of sleeping or relaxing more than you normally do. Let me introduce you to the concept of compassion.



In the past, therapeutic technics for times of stress such as exams have been very focused on the relationship between thoughts (cognitions) and behaviour, to produce a commonly known therapy

named cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

In brief, the idea behind CBT is that by altering the thoughts you are having, you can influence the behaviours. For example, if you constantly think 'I hate social events because everyone judges me' it will likely reduce your behaviour of turning up at social events as the mental load has increased.

However, if you become aware of this thought, it can be broken down and reconstructed to something more useful for yourself such as 'Social events are challenging for me' or even 'I enjoy times with my friends'. These thoughts will contribute to increased behaviour of going to social events if practiced enough.

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*Building compassion is a long process...*

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Furthermore, it will likely open your perception to

have a better time at the social event meaning each exposure to a social event will increase the likelihood of going to another.



CBT principles such as this have continued to be backed by mountains of empirical evidence, making it a very popular therapeutic perspective, however what it doesn't consider is everything else that is going on. More recently, a wave of therapeutic styles were introduced from CBT, one of these being compassionate focused therapy (CFT).

When I first came across CFT my initial thoughts associated it with the messages of social media around self-care and taking baths. Although in

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principle I could understand the line of thought that these messages come from - you should listen to what your body needs and you should be kind to your self - it kind of felt like a get out of free jail card to avoid anxiety provoking life events. And as someone susceptible to burnout tendencies, it was very difficult to see it otherwise. I was wrong however, about CFT. It offered a third option between burnout and baths.

CFT techniques focus on building a compassionate identity through learning to sit with difficulty and to offer relief from difficulty.

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*They are still going to be anxiety provoking and stressful...*

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Compassion can be applied to all domains, to self and to others. It offers a sensitivity to challenge, but unlike that of self-care, it doesn't move away from challenge altogether.

Being compassionate means acknowledging the difficulty, taking into account all contextual factors, and finding ways to

support oneself through it whilst being forgiving towards times we did not have that support and were not able to achieve or move forward as we would have wished. It is creating a balance between offering comfort and kindness and sitting amongst the discomfort alongside the kindness.



In practice, a compassionate approach to exams would not mean moving away from revision because its anxiety provoking or revising all day and ignoring all other needs (sleep, food, socialising) which are essential for mental and physical health. A compassionate approach means looking at the difficulties set out in front of you, as well as all the other events happening in your life that increase stress, and identifying ways to make the time of stress doable.

Is the environment adding to your stress by making you too hot or cold? Have

you chunked the stressful task up into manageable amounts with stress relieving activities in between (e.g., even being on your phone if this offers you stress-relief but even better if it's something like a walk)?

They are still going to be anxiety provoking and stressful - even a bubble bath can't avoid this. Acknowledge this and sit with it. It is okay. Take yourself outside your comfort zone by doing the task that brings you anxiety and acknowledging the anxiety. But bring a compassionate approach with you, not one of self-critic.

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*...imagine what a friend offering compassion to you would be doing or saying...*

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Building compassion is a long process and the change is not measurable so progress can feel unknown. Today I have simply introduced the idea of compassion; it is an abstract concept and takes time to come to terms with, but it can make stressful

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times, such as exams, run smoothly without burnout.

### What can you do to build compassion?

A great place to start is to explore what you understand by the word 'compassion', whether this be through thought, pen and paper, or discussion. What is compassion to you? After reading this, has your understanding changed? Is compassion something you have explored in the past?



In order to begin to think more compassionately, it can be useful to identify areas in your life where you or others have shown compassion. It is often more difficult to show compassion to yourself, so identifying times when you have been compassionate towards others can be the start of building a compassionate identity.

Can you think of any times you have shown others or yourself compassion recently? In what ways did you show compassion?

One step towards being compassionate to yourself in exam season is to imagine what a friend offering compassion to you would be doing or saying and then offering this to yourself.

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*It is often more difficult to show compassion to yourself...*

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It is interesting in itself who you pick to imagine/who first comes to your mind – is it the gentle person in your life who prioritises rest or the determined one who prioritises productivity or something else altogether? The person who comes to mind may indicate what you need specifically at this point in time, and what the compassion you offer yourself could look like. Do you need to take a well-earned break and have that bubble bath, or are you better tackling your revision in 30 minute chunks, with little rewards in between?

For more information on how to build a compassionate identity and information of specific practices to do so, see

Irons and Beaumont's (2017) book 'The compassionate mind workbook' which you can borrow from the Library.