

LIVING FULLY...
It's Okay to be Not Okay
Carol Simpson 8/28/22

I find that I often want to teach things I need to learn myself, and our summer theme of Living Fully seems the perfect place to fit in a service I'm calling, It's Okay to be Not Okay, since feeling Not Okay is definitely part of Living Fully. I like this introduction by Christopher Germer to his book *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*. He writes:

“Life is tough. Despite our best intentions, things go wrong. How do we typically react when things fall apart? More often than not, we feel ashamed and become self-critical: What's wrong with me? Why can't I cope? Why me? Perhaps we go on a mission to fix ourselves, adding insult to injury....Yet no matter how hard we try to avoid emotional pain, it follows us everywhere. Difficult emotions – shame, anger, loneliness, fear, despair, confusion – arrive like clockwork at our door. **THEY COME WHEN THINGS DON'T GO ACCORDING TO OUR EXPECTATIONS...** It's just not possible to avoid feeling bad.”

But we can learn to deal with misery and distress in healthier way. Instead of greeting difficult emotions by fighting against them, we can witness our own pain and respond with kindness and understanding. That's self-compassion – **TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES JUST AS WE'D TREAT SOMEONE WE LOVE DEARLY.** ...Why should you deny yourself the same tenderness and warmth you extend to others who are suffering?

How many times a day do we say it? “How are you?” ‘I'm okay.’ “I'm fine.” “I'm good.” The expected response. Many times the asker doesn't really want more information; it's just an opening remark. And we **WANT** to be ‘fine’, ‘good’, or even ‘great!’ All the time. Every day.

If you see someone who is obviously **NOT** fine, someone who's crying, for example, what's your first instinct? Dry their tears. Indicate, by word or deed, that they should “cheer up”. put on a smile, ‘get over it’. We live in a culture that expects relentless good cheer. It's enough to make us say, **“I'm sorry I feel bad.”**

I DO feel sorry when I feel sad, angry, depressed, overwhelmed, out of sorts. I tell myself I SHOULDN'T feel that way. I judge myself – bad!

- Look at all I have to be thankful for.
- Look at all the people who are worse off than me – who would love to walk in my shoes.
- I must have done something to make this happen.
- How can anyone want to be with me if I'm like this.
- I look awful when I've been crying', or 'I should be over this by now.'

So in addition to feeling bad, I feel bad about feeling bad.

I feel I'm not okay if I don't feel okay.

Does anyone know what I'm talking about?

Buddhists use the phrase “the second arrow”. A person who is shot with an arrow feels the physical pain of that wound. But then, if he asks himself, ‘Who shot me? Why would he do that? I haven't done anything to offend anyone, why am I the one shot?’ the mental pain that creates is like being shot a second time.

Last month I heard an interview on PBS after the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Amna Navaz asked a professional counselor what kind of help was being given to the students, parents, teachers, and neighbors who came to get help from her. The counselor replied, “I ask them how they are feeling about what happened, and I validate that.” ...There's no urging them to move on, or to look on the bright side. Instead, they are asked to slow down, look inside, talk about their bad feelings. And not just for the first 24 hours.

I've been reading this book: Self-Compassion, by Dr. Kristin Neff. She says we should treat our pain with the same gentleness and care that we would give to others who are suffering. We can use our own experience of suffering as a way of opening our hearts to others - widening our circle of compassion in non-judgmental awareness.

Difficult emotions arrive daily at our door. It's just not possible to avoid feeling bad. We can't avoid pain. But can reduce suffering, by **allowing** the pain and letting go of our need to explain it or justify it. **Picture this equation: Suffering = Pain X Avoidance.** (repeat) Avoidance? Dr. Neff simply says, “Our emotional suffering is caused by the desire for things to be other than they are.” “Pain is unavoidable.” “This is how things are.”

But we try to avoid it. How? First, ignore it. Pay no attention to it. Don't talk about it. Move on. Or minimize it – it's not that bad; he/she didn't mean it. We send ourselves all sorts of "second arrows" rather than to "Soften, soothe, and allow" the pain – which allows us to pass through it. Change happens naturally when we open ourselves to emotional pain with kindness instead of blaming, criticizing and trying to fix ourselves.

It's okay to feel 'not okay'.

Neff offers 3 "doorways" into self-compassion.

- 1. You can hold your thoughts and emotions in awareness.**
- 2. You can remind yourself that pain is part of the shared human experience.**
- 3. You can give yourself compassion and care**

For example: I'm having a hard time; Pain is a part of life; May I be kind to myself; May I give myself the compassion I need.

A brief personal story – I don't like heights much, and I don't like highway driving in traffic; so, getting to Newport, Rhode Island across the toll bridge there is a high-tension experience. I don't want to glance down to the waters below. I don't like to be crowded by other cars trying to hurry. I grip the steering wheel and stare straight ahead, anxious, perspiring, heart beating hard. One day when I was driving alone across this bridge I started quietly talking to myself – out loud. "You're doing fine. You're almost there. Easy does it. No need to hurry. You're doing fine." I was talking to myself as I would talk to a frightened new driver. This was a moment of self-compassion. I'm much more practiced at the opposite: "Stop this. This is ridiculous. You know the bridge is perfectly safe."

It's interesting how skilled we can be at offering compassion to a child, or to a dear friend. Why were so many of us taught not to 'feel sorry for yourself', not to be gentle and supportive? "Why should you deny yourself the same tenderness and warmth you extend to others who are suffering? "

When I was growing up in various Christian denominations, I got the clear message that compassion is virtuous **when it is extended to others**. Not to yourself! That was selfish. That was “feeling sorry for yourself”. That was inappropriate. (despite Biblical injunctions such as “love your neighbor **as you love yourself**”.) But inherent worth and dignity – our first Unitarian Universalist principle – asserts that kindness is our inherent right. We deserve it, and we don’t have to earn it. It’s all about treating ourselves with the same kind of care that we would offer to a beloved friend. And so I offer you these words:

May love soften your heart toward your own pain and sorrow, to allow you to move through it naturally, and so that you may understand and feel compassion to others.

Intro Song #1021-- Lean On Me
