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# Self-compassion or compassion for yourself in times of a pandemic ... but not only

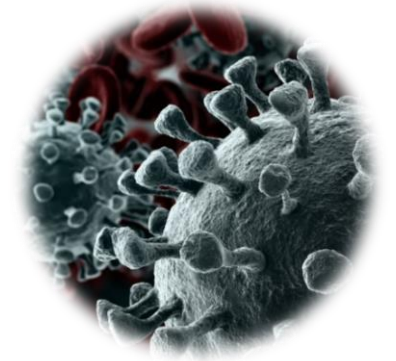
Popular science presentation for medics and others

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# Me/ we in the era of the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic



Difficult times magnify our best and worst tendencies:

- Isolation, reduction of earnings / unemployment, attempts of autocrats increase our **fear** for our lives and health and that of our loved ones - I will not repay the loan, I will not be able to stand myself and my loved ones in quarantine. This promotes aggression towards others and attempts to escape from situation to addictions;
- On the other hand, we are seeing unprecedented acts of social **solidarity** and support for medical services more often.

*"The virus has taken the crown off of  
humanity's head"*

Prof. B. de Barbaro



- The planet-wide infection has made us aware of the **codependence** of all.
- **Powerlessness** in the face of its scale and dynamics, also in the richest countries, **overthrew the belief in the omnipotence** of our species.
- It also sparked discussions about the **limits of consumption** and the need to limit its consequences: the exploitation of our planet, **global warming and pollution**.
- It inspired reflection whether the **strategy of "subduing the earth"** should not be replaced with a **strategy of tuning in to nature and restoring the harmony of coexistence** of all beings inhabiting the blue planet.



# How A 15,000-Year-Old Human Bone Could Help You Through The Coronacrisis

**Forbes**

21 Mar 2020



Anthropologist Margaret Mead, when asked by students about the first signs of civilization, did not talk about fishhooks, clay pots or polished stones, but about the femur bone, broken and then healed.

She explained that in the animal kingdom, when you break a leg, you die. You cannot run away from danger, reach the river for water to drink or hunt down something to eat. You become the food of carnivores. No unattended animal can survive long enough for a leg to heal.

It is proof, that someone took the time to stay with the person who fell, bandaged his wound, kept him out of harm's way, and cared for him until he recovered.

“Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization\* starts”

Let's remember this in the time of the corona crisis!

\*Civility- kindness, benevolence

## *“Compassion for yourself?!”*

*You have to be strong in life, not feel sorry for yourself!”*

- In the Western mentality, still lingers the method of "**cold breeding**", according to which children who demand warmth, cuddling and kissing are "spoiled" (J. Watson - 1920s).
- Until the 1970s (J. Bowlby's attachment theory), psychologists doubted the role of the emotional bond between parents and children.
- The attachment theory points to the key role of the **quality of a person's relationship in childhood** on how he/ she will cope in life. This quality results to a large extent from the **care** given to the child (**acceptance, time and attention**) when experiencing physical or mental pain. This care creates a safe base that allows you to fully **realise your human potential**.

# Compassion ≠ self - pity

In psychology, **self-compassion has nothing to do with self-pity.** When people feel sorry for themselves, they feel **self-pity, have a tendency to experience other negative feelings, such as guilt and shame.** And because their psyche defends itself against so many negative feelings, all sorts of defence mechanisms of **transferring those emotions** kick in – **blaming others** for their misfortune. People who feel sorry for themselves feel bad when others are doing well, because they tend to **compare themselves to those around them.**

# Comparing (yourself) with the others → self-esteem

- Many of us **compare themselves with others**. We were taught that at home and in school. Students and siblings were pointed out as role models, as those who have good grades, are polite, etc. This clichéd style of influence leaves a permanent mark on our psyche.
- Children who are judged grow up to compare and compete with others. When this fails and our **self-esteem is negative**, they fall into a spiral of self-blame.
- **Critical self-esteem is detrimental to the ability to generate compassion for oneself, and therefore for others**. The other person is perceived as completely different, the common fate is not noticed.



# The cult of high self-esteem

The cult of high self-esteem, long **considered a panacea for almost everything**, is deeply rooted. Research show that such people have a significantly **distorted self-image** and show signs of **interpersonal aggression**. These people need **constant confirmation of their own high self-esteem**. They inevitably face failures. This leads to anxiety, depression and internal conflicts. They are prone to prejudice and to discriminate against others. This "my myness" often extends to the whole group - "my football club", "my church", "my party" or "my nation", which are perceived as superior to other fans, "Jews", "Pakis", LGBT, etc. This "tribalism" makes it impossible to open up to others and understand.

# “There is no lotus without mud”

Compassion is something completely different - it doesn't compare, it doesn't judge. With compassion for myself/others, I can **accept, understand, soothe no matter what I am/they are like.** Compassion is especially needed in times of setbacks, losses, and disappointments, and these happen to all of us, even though our culture makes us believe otherwise.

We feel discomfort every day, and often it is greater - caused by aging, loss of health, loved ones, friends, status or wealth. This **unwanted “mud of life” creates a chance** to develop higher emotions: compassion, love and inner freedom. Only where it is difficult **can the "lotus" of good bloom.** This is the essence of the Buddhist metaphor about the origins of compassion.

# Entering “the mud of our life”

- Self-compassion is not about pleasure, it's not just about taking care of yourself, it's about **opening yourself up to suffering** and embracing it with kindness. This takes **courage**.
- Research show that people who have more **self-compassion** have **more compassion for others**, are more agreeable, and get along better in relationships and at work because they **recognize the needs of others**. They also tend to **be altruistic**.
- Research also confirms that people with self-compassion are **more likely to apologize and take responsibility**. It is **strength, not weakness**.

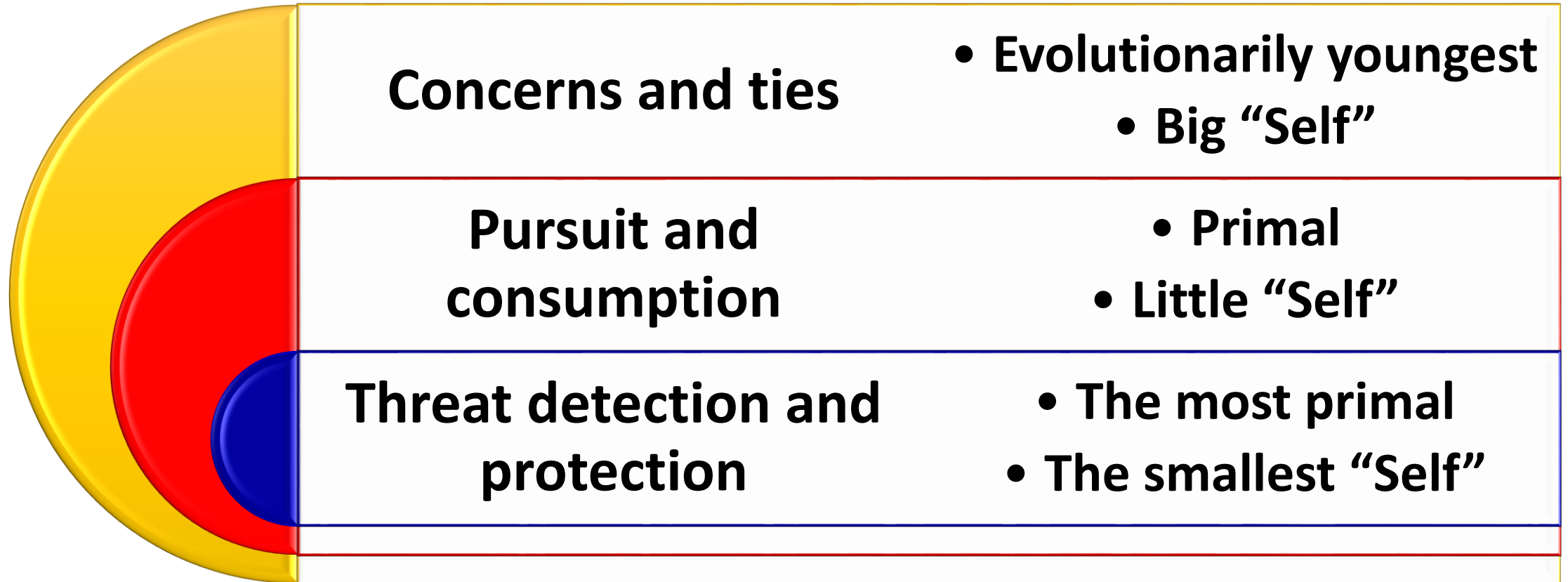
# Self-compassion → **compassion for others**

- The basic relationship is the relationship with yourself. It shapes all other relationships. **If we cannot show compassion to ourselves, we will not be able to show it to others. Or it will be conditional** - for example, we will only be able to give it to those we love, and even that not always.
- Showing kindness and care causes the **stress-stimulated body to calm down** and **immediate physiological changes** occur: lowering blood pressure, cortisol concentration, and increasing the concentration of endorphins and oxytocin, the secretion of which is associated with trust and a sense of closeness.

# Habitual avoidance of unwanted experiences

- **This mud is associated with emotions that we usually do not want to experience, and instead of facing them, we escape** into alcohol, drugs, and temporarily playing a game on the phone, entering a chat or Facebook, porn site or aggression directed at loved ones / others. **This avoidance becomes a habit and is common today (*experiential avoidance*)**. The range of mechanisms for avoiding unpleasant emotions is very wide.
- **While avoidance is not the best option, feeling guilty about feeling this way doesn't solve anything.** This is how evolution shaped our human brain. Fortunately, we have one more tool at hand - **wise, good and soothing being with ourselves and with others**. This is our huge potential and the possibility of development for our benefit and for benefit of others.

# 3 major emotional systems





# Threat detection and protection system “Reptilian brain”



- *Threat and self-protection*- central, the most primal.
- **fear, anxiety, disgust**
- It allowed us **to survive as a species** - when prehistoric man heard rustling in the grass, he ran away to a tree without thinking (the rule “better safe than sorry” - an error in judgment could be the last one)
- **Rarely necessary today**, however, due to its nature, it **often gains priority**, it is the **basis of the brain's default mode (constant monitoring of possible threats)**, generating train of thoughts and hijacking our consciousness.

# Pursuit and consumption system “Pleasure s.”



- *Drive- an resource-seeking-* The second system - quite primitive; the pursuit of resource acquisition is associated with consumption and the experience of **pleasure and satisfaction**.
- The source of our need to show ourselves, to spread the "peacock tail", to show that we are better, more resourceful - motivates us to behave in a way necessary for **reproduction and survival**.
- Modern culture/ mind-set draws heavily from this system, based on the feeling, that "**mine**" **must be on top (competition) and driving consumption**.

# Care and bonds “Compassions.”



- *Soothing and affiliation*- The third is the system of solace and connection, i.e. **care and a sense of belonging - compassion.**
- Evolution formed and promoted, because it turned out that organisms that take care of their offspring, creating a bond with them, **have a better chance of survival and procreation.**
- Western psychology **discovered it only in the second half of the 20th century** due to the attachment theory of J. Bowlby.

# The social brain and the creation of culture

- Thanks to caring and bonding, evolution significantly accelerated and developed a “**social brain**” (R. Dunbar 2010). Allows us to have the ability to **embrace other minds with our mind and to cooperate.**
- Also this system allowed us to **create a narrative, i.e. culture and art** (Y. Harari 2014).
- The **basic function of the neocortex**, that is the part of the brain that distinguishes us from animals, is precisely the **function of establishing relationships.**

# Mental health = emotional balance

- Unregulated drives and excessive consumption foster heartlessness and indifference to the suffering of others



- Care and tenderness mute threat detection
- Priority in a dangerous situation
- May block compassion s.



**Neither system is good or bad.** What matters is the **balance** between them and **flexible switching** - adequate to the situation. **Mindfulness** is the key.

## *"Love thy neighbour as thyself"*

- Both the Gospel commandment of love and Buddhist altruism rest on the **cornerstone of self-compassion**.
- The belief in the **interdependence** of all people and living beings and the **universality of the world of human feelings** awakens natural **compassion** in us, but its development must begin with **caring and taking care of ourselves**.
- **Without accepting and understanding uncomfortable feelings within ourselves**, we will not develop **deep compassion for others**, but we will also not experience **true inner freedom**.



# *Self-compassion* in psychology



- "Self-compassion" is a relatively new concept. **The first paper** on this topic was published by **prof. Kristin Neff in 2003** in the USA.
- According to her, the *self-compassion* attitude is a remedy for **the pursuit of high self-esteem and its negative effects.**
- *Self-compassion* is based on a **non-judgmental attitude towards oneself and others.** Research shows that it **significantly facilitates overcoming internal difficulties.**
- Self-compassion is the **key to a better life.** Being sensitive, empathetic, non-judgmental, forgiving to yourself is **not self-centeredness.** On the contrary - the attitude of *self-compassion* **allows you to feel better about yourself and be better for others.**

# 3 pillars of the *self-compassion* attitude

The self-compassion method is inspired by the philosophy of the East, mainly the Buddhist teachings, in which compassion for others and oneself has been considered the main value of life for several thousand years.

It consists of three main components:

- **mindfulness (reflexivity)** - is patient, distanced observation of oneself as a being experiencing specific emotions. A reflective person watches his/ her experiences as if he/ she was watching clouds. It does not include them in a sense of identity.
- **kindness** - gentleness and understanding towards each other in feelings, thoughts and actions.
- **a sense of community with other people** - the context of the experiences of all humanity, which brings relief from suffering instead of a sense of alienation.

# Mindfulness

- In Kristin Neff's model, the first step to compassion is mindfulness, i.e. the **ability to non-judgmentally, acceptingly realize what I am currently experiencing, what is happening to me.**
- Due to the **complexity of the world of our emotions and the variety of expressive potential** from love and compassion to aggression and hatred, developing mindfulness, based on objective self-reflection, enables a **conscious, not entangled choice of response motivated by compassion.**
- **Mindfulness is not just a technique, but a way of life.** It is the key to a life based on conscious choices, which expands the space of our inner freedom and reduces the mental suffering of us and the others.
- In Buddhist psychology, **the enlightened mind is compared to a bird whose wings are compassion and mindfulness - both are necessary for flight.** Mindfulness provides the technical basis for the expression of compassion, which as a motivator sets the direction.

# Kindness to yourself

- When feeling self-compassion, I **accept what I'm going through**, I'm kind to myself, but **I don't feel sorry for myself**, I try to look for the **best solution** precisely because I care about myself. People who have compassion for themselves are **braver**.
- By understanding **what is under our control** and therefore **what we can take responsibility for**, what we cannot change and what we must accept, **we restore dignity to our lives** and can help others as well.
- **Our mental world of emotions is extremely complex** - it's the result of evolution. **It's not our fault. We don't have to be ashamed of it.**

# Sense of community with other people

- Recognizing that the difficulties one experiences and the feelings associated with them are part of being human. Kristin Neff calls it a **common humanity**.
- Seeing our own experiences as a **result of the complexity of the human mind**, rather than as something personal, isolating, and embarrassing.
- A deep conviction about the **universal nature of the world of emotions**, which is shared by all humanity.
- Seeing your own difficulties in believing that **everyone, just like us, wants happiness and doesn't want to suffer**, and that **we are all interdependent**.

# Meditation techniques developing self-compassion

**Meditation is developing mindfulness and cultivating mental habits based on useful motivations (e.g. compassion)**

Training in cultivating self-compassion usually follows the practice of focus and mindfulness. After calming the mind, we can use one of the techniques:

- Awakening the compassionate “Self”
- Contemplation of the 4 noble states of mind (kindness, compassion, co-joy and impartiality)
- The practice of taking and giving (tonglen)

***Self-compassion***= **being your own best friend**: In a difficult moment, we can visualize a friend sitting next to us talking about our experience. We can also write a letter to ourselves from the position of a supportive caring friend.



# “The Tender Narrator” - the Nobel Lecture by O. Tokarczuk



- “**Tenderness is common sharing of fate**, perceives the **bonds** that connect us. It is the way of looking that shows the **world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and co-dependent on itself**. We are a **small** and at the same time **powerful part** of it.”
- “The climate and the political crisis [and corona crisis] have not come out of nowhere. Greed, failure to respect nature, selfishness, lack of imagination, rivalry and lack of responsibility have reduced the world to the status of an object that can be cut into pieces, used up and destroyed.”
- It is up to us whether the **narrative of our lives will be compassion for ourselves, and thus also for others**, or whether we will let the fear-fuelled stories of others impose on us. **What kind of world do we want for ourselves and future generations? Can we afford the courage to open up to ourselves and others?**

# Recommended reading

- **Mindful Compassion** P. Gilbert & Choden, New Harbinger Publications; 1st edition (April 1, 2014)
- **Życie piękna katastrofa** J. Kabat-Zinn (2014) Czarna Owca. Warszawa;
- **The Mindfulness Solution** Ronald D. Siegel The Guilford Press; 1st edition (November 8, 2009)
- **Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind** Yuval Noah Harari Harper; Reprint edition (February 10, 2015)
- **Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow** Yuval Noah Harari Harper; Illustrated edition (February 21, 2017)



**God, give me everything,  
so I can enjoy my life**

**You fool, I gave you life, for you  
to enjoy everything**

Thank you for your attention  
and wish you all the best  
Janusz Myśliwiec