

The Check-In

Once you are on board with the idea of creating a more functional relationship with yourself (also known as self-compassion,) how do we go about this process? For someone who does not have a history of being self-compassionate or still harbors negative beliefs about it, attempting to make too great a change too quickly can be destabilising. We want our initial techniques to be smoothly implemented. To give you an idea about what it can be like trying to change our internal relationship too quickly consider the following story.

Say our friend Bob moves into a new apartment on the 30th floor. On the first day he gets in the elevator to go to the ground floor. Before the doors close his neighbour John gets in the elevator with him. John introduces himself and it seems like a good start. However, then John says, "do you know what? My girlfriend cheated on me last week". Bob is quite taken aback by this and doesn't quite know what to say. He mutters something about how sorry he is to hear this and he hopes John is ok. There is an uncomfortable silence for a minute. Bob feels like he has to say something so he says "what are you up to today John?". John replies, "I'm going to the doctor". Bob responds, "I hope nothing serious?". John replies "I've got this serious rash on my genitals do you want to see?". Bob is shocked and tells John quickly "no, that's ok, I can imagine".

At this point Bob is looking at the numbers on the elevator and hoping it will reach the ground floor as quickly as possible. He is feeling extremely uncomfortable now, but as the elevator will take a while longer to reach the ground he again tries to fill the silence with another question. He asks "what are you going to do on the weekend John?". John replies "I'm going camping by myself do you want to come?" At this stage Bob is feeling even more off balance and is begging the elevator to move faster. Once the doors open he quickly mutters "nice to meet you, see you around" as he hastily heads for the exit to the building.

Most people have had similar experiences on both sides. Alcohol is usually involved. "I can't believe he said that" and "I can't believe I said that" are thoughts greeting millions around the world on any given Sunday morning. Regardless it can create uncomfortableness in the future. The point of that story is that if we make too big a shift too quickly in your relationship with yourself and your inner dialogue then you may feel like Bob at the end of a long elevator ride. We want to make shifts smoothly and efficiently.

How might Bob and John's relationship evolve organically? Maybe at that first meeting in the elevator a few simple

exchanges introducing themselves. Over the next few weeks and months some incidental conversations whenever they randomly meet and some polite waves at the letterbox. Perhaps even borrowing the odd tool. A few months down the track perhaps a few polite hours at an invited BBQ. Fast forward three years later. One afternoon Bob finds himself ringing John "I've got a few things going on, are you free later to chat?", John replies "yes, I'll meet you at the usual cafe."

After hanging up the phone Bob realises that he and John are actually quite good friends now and wonders, "Where did that come from? I don't recall making that decision consciously but here we are." It just evolved organically. The point is that we want to evolve that type of relationship with the self. One that smoothly and almost imperceptibly moves towards more emotional safety.

A technique that can be useful in the development of this process is called the "check in". It's a simple technique that usually takes between 10 and 30 seconds to complete, ideally 3 to 4 times a day randomly. Randomly implemented is important so you don't develop the technique as an antidote to feeling off in the moment. We want to apply it across all possible mood states you may be experiencing, good, bad and indifferent.

The start of the technique is a simple question you ask yourself by name "Hey Angus, how are you doing?". We have constructed the technique where all responses will fall into one of three categories. The first category is relevant if you feel anywhere from "great" to "ok". In that case the response you give yourself will be words to the effect of "Hey great. I'll check in later. Catch you later". The most important part of the response is the statement about checking in later. We are demonstrating that this is an ongoing relationship with the self not a once off. Feeling great to ok is not a "win" in this exercise. It is actually irrelevant. We are seeding the idea of an ongoing unconditional support we will be giving ourselves. Some people stop their reply once they realise they are feeling ok as if being ok means they don't "need any intervention". The process doesn't work without the indication to the self that this is an ongoing support and relationship. Some people initially feel a little awkward "talking to themselves". However, you should remember that you run an internal dialogue almost continuously throughout your entire life. We are just momentarily adding some formal structure to it for a very good purpose.

The second category of possible responses we have created is where you feel somewhere between "ok" and "not so good". It's where you might feel mildly "off" in some way: tired, head-achy,

irritable, a little flat etc. So after the question "Hey Angus, how are you doing?" say the response is "A bit off. I have a mild headache." The idea now is that you will do a token gesture of caring. Much like the proverbial chicken soup for someone who is sick. So the token gesture might be "Hey, let's go get a glass of water. Haven't had any water today. I'll come with you. Let's go and get some water." After you have completed this token gesture of caring you also add "I'll check in later." It should be noted that the token gesture of caring doesn't need to be tailored to any issue that arises. We have used glass of water in response to initial awareness of a headache but glass of water could be the gesture for a range of minor things that come up such as "feeling a little stressed right now." It could be also something like taking a ten minute walk or getting something to eat.

The third category is the the most counter intuitive for many people, at least at the start. This is the category where you feel somewhere between "a bit off" and the worst day of your life. It would appear that if we continue the trajectory of the category 1 and 2 responses then we will be increasing our practical intervention here in solving the underlying issue at the heart of the instability we are feeling. The natural response to being in that state is to work out how to try to fix the problem to regain emotional stability. However, the irony is that to be in a category 3 space often means that the solution is not going to be quick and simple and if your only method of regaining emotional stability is problem solving and problem solving can't do that right in this moment you often find yourself feeling even more vulnerable and unstable. This can continue in a negative feedback loop and create a psychological spiral. Jumping straight into the practical problem solving can be the emotional equivalent of using a fire extinguisher actually filled with petrol.

This usual problem solving response is natural. However, let's look at this approach through a relationship analogy. In this example, a man's wife comes home from work and she has had a terrible day. There are some ongoing issues with her boss and they don't seem to be resolving as quickly as she hoped. She starts talking to her husband about the situation and he jumps in and gives her advice about how to solve this ongoing issue. She gets irritable with him and then he feels hurt saying "I was just trying to help!" An argument ensues and they don't speak for 3 or 4 hours (or perhaps 3 or 4 days). She feels unheard and he feels an injustice was done to him. This type of scenario with the husband and wife role switched just as commonly is common.

What's going on here usually? The wife may just want connection and reassurance in the moment. The husband just wants

to take his wife's pain away. She interprets his advice as a form of condescension as if he thinks she is incapable of working out things for herself. He just wants to minimise the negative emotion and move into "solving" the situation as soon as possible.

Let's look at what might be the "least worst" approach the husband might have taken in this situation. By saying words to the effect "whatever you need I'm here" won't solve the problem in and of itself, but it is laying the psychological safety foundation to go through the process of resolving or coming to terms with the issue as smoothly as possible. Because at this point the threat is both internal and external. Not only do we have the feeling of threat regarding the problem, we have the lurking inner tyrant potentially ready to criticise both how we got into the predicament and grading us harshly about how we are going about responding to it. Self compassion has unconditionality at its heart. Failure, success, good, bad or otherwise are irrelevant in this exact moment and are not related to the long term success or resolution we are aiming for. It's the "I've got your back no matter what happens" sentiment. This is not about ignoring the problem. It is about not making the solving the problem the only way to get emotional stability back. It's about getting emotional stability back first before engaging with the problem. It also doesn't mean that engaging with the problem needs to stop until complete emotional stability is found first. Sometimes this stability can start to come online with minutes and it doesn't need to be complete before continuing to actually address the problem. Even 20% more emotional stability before engaging with the problem is valuable. So, if we ask "Hey Angus, how are you doing?" and we reply "I'm feeling absolutely terrible about XYZ", instead of acting like our metaphorical husband earlier saying "you should do this and that", saying "whatever you need I'm here". Trying to deeply feel what it would feel like to hear that from someone you deeply trusted is key. Having this burgeoning safety can help you create more patience and depth to your problem solving. If you are in emotional turmoil until you solve the problem you will only consider 1 or 2 step possible solutions because you need to solve it now because you feel so emotionally destabilised. It is also extremely difficult to do deep thinking with the flight or fight response raging. We are more likely to be able to see the possible 14 steps required over the next 4 weeks to move us forward in our response to the issue.

None of this is a soft option. There have been experiments going back more than half a century examining toddlers and their relationship with their caregivers. When toddlers with different attachment styles such as secure, anxious, ambivalent and combinations were examined it was found that the toddlers who were most securely emotionally attached explored the furthest

in the strange environments. It was as if their comfort zones were expanded further than the other children. The safety they felt became an engine of courage although they weren't pushing back against any anxiety they were just exploring further out more curiously.