Self-Compassion and Its Place in Medical Education

May 29, 2014
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Introduction

• **Compassion:** “an intimate awareness of one’s suffering, and willingness to alleviate it.”

• **Self-compassion:** compassion directed inward.

*Self portrait (1913) by Egon Schiele*
Introduction

• Research suggests that self-compassion
  – provides more resilience by moderating reactions to negative events and thoughts (depression, anxiety, PTSD)
  – motivates healthy behaviors (substance abuse, diet, smoking)
  – improves interpersonal relationships (connection, forgiveness, perspective-taking)

Clinical Contexts:
Who needs Self-compassion?

Patients

Providers

Medical Students
How can we learn to practice self-compassion?
Research Design

• Interview health professionals across the fields on the meaning and art of self-compassion over the three-month period.

• 11 professionals from multiple backgrounds and stages of training: Palliative Medicine, Pain Medicine, Family Medicine, Psychiatry, Social Work, Clinical Psychology, Peer Counseling (SNAP), Employee Counseling, and Computer Science.

• Various patient demographics

• Analyzed 10 hours worth of qualitative data.
Process of Self-compassion

Contextualization
Why does it make sense that you want to take care of yourself?

Reflection
What do you feel about your thoughts and behaviors?

Mobilization
How will you actually change internally?
Interview Data

- Communication
- Arts and Technology
- Social and Experiential Learning
I. Communication

• Use language that encourages positive reflection
  – “In the past, tell me what you have done to succeed to make you feel good.” (Family medicine physician)
  – “What is it that you feel so good about this behavior?” (Clinical psychologist)
  – “For high functioning individuals, helping them move to greyer area of cognitive process is key. So is confidentiality.” (SNAP, Employee assistance program)
I. Communication

• Create a safe space that encourages self-reflection.
  – “While listening, focus on identifying their inner values” *(Psychiatrist)*
  – “We’re running out of time, but this is an important topic. Can we pick it up next time we meet?”
  – Avoid “I know this must be difficult for you.”
I. Communication

• “When you mess up, be sincere and apologize to a child… The message ‘that you are a valuable person who deserves an apology’ is powerful.”

(Social worker)
II. Arts and Technology

• Utilize reflective writing
  – “In my practice, I sometimes have patients write a letter to ‘pain’ or ‘addiction.’ This exercise helps mobilize feelings that patients did not know existed in them.” (Pain medicine physician)
II. Arts and Technology

• Use audiovisual stimuli
  – “There seems to be an ill-defined area in higher-level center of brain that audiovisual input triggers through our emotional system.” (Psychiatrist)
II. Arts and Technology

• Utilize self-care technology
  – “Sometimes we don’t know why we even have that unhealthy habit, or that thought. Technology can identify that habit-forming moment for us to effectively intervene.”

[Image of Quitbit device]
Quitbit
The first smart lighter and app to track smoking.
Find Out More
Some things you can ask me:

“I want you to play last voicemail”

“I want you to increase brightness”

“What is John Appleseed saying?”

“Tell me about surfing”

“What are the best beaches for surfing?”
III. Social and Experiential Learning Perspective

- Educate common humanity

“There are many things going on. You discover that there are people who are worse off, which is humbling. By engaging in your surroundings, you gain a perspective in life. You are giving to others, which is gratifying. You are actually doing all these things that work in psychotherapy.” (Pain medicine physician)
III. Social and Experiential Learning Perspective

- Give accountability
  - “Research has shown that employment helps mental health outcomes significantly. There’s a need for more programming to give inactive veterans chances to reclaim their self-worth at work.”  
    
    (Mental health professional)
Why does it make sense that you want to take care of yourself?

Reflection
What do you feel about your thoughts and behaviors?

Mobilization
How will you actually change internally?

Contextualization
Why does it make sense that you want to take care of yourself?

- Reflective writing
- Audiovisual stimuli
- Technology

- Space for self-reflection
- Counseling

- Accountability
- Common humanity

Reflection, Mobilization, Contextualization
Developing Pedagogical Tools for Compassionate Care

1. Recognize the value of self-compassion in medicine
2. Learn communication skills, consciously apply them, and receive feedback
3. Consolidation and quality control of self-help resources
   – Assess the quality of self-help meetings, art therapists, and social workers in the community
Developing Pedagogical Tools for Compassionate Care

4. New health systems development in primary care (e.g. *Shared medical appointments at VA, Shared decision making at DHMC*)

5. More research in developing experimental models of treatment by collaboration with scientists, artists, and engineers.
Acknowledgement

: Schwartz Compassionate Care Steering Committee, 11 anonymous interviewees, and Dr. Robert Chapman

*Double-self portrait (1915)* by Egon Schiele