

Compassion Focused Therapy

The work of Professor Paul Gilbert

British clinical psychologist Paul Gilbert spent decades studying shame, self-criticism and mood through an evolutionary lens. From this he developed Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT), which helps people caught in harsh self-judgement meet suffering with warmth, courage and wisdom.

University of Derby

Professor of Clinical Psychology

Shame & self-criticism

The difficulties CFT was developed for

Compassionate Mind

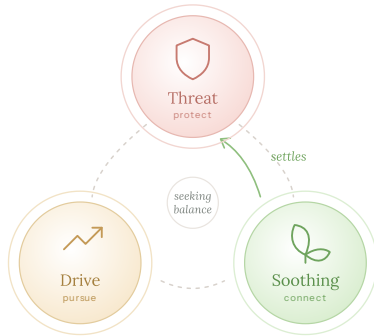
Foundation established in 2006

OBE, 2011

For services to mental health

01 The three emotion-regulation systems

A simplified model of how we evolved to feel



THREAT & SELF-PROTECTION

anxiety · anger · disgust

Alert to danger. Readies us to fight, flee or freeze; fires readily at criticism, including our own.

DRIVE & RESOURCE-SEEKING

excitement · pleasure · wanting

Motivated to pursue. Energises us toward goals and rewards; can tip into striving to avoid feeling inferior.

SOOTHING & AFFILIATION

contentment · calm · belonging

Safe and connected. Active when we feel safe and cared for; settles threat, and is what compassion practice strengthens.

No system is "bad". Problems arise when threat dominates and soothing is under-developed.

Our "tricky brain"

Our brains evolved rather than being designed. Ancient motives meet newer powers of imagination, which can keep threat running long after danger has passed.

Old brain

Safety, status, belonging



New brain

Imagining, ruminating, judging

Not our fault – but we can train a kinder mind.

Two ways to respond to a mistake

SHAME-BASED SELF-ATTACK

Looks back, wanting to punish
Fuelled by anger, contempt or fear
Global: "I'm useless"
Feeds avoidance and fear of failing

COMPASSIONATE CORRECTION

Looks forward, wanting to grow
Fuelled by care and encouragement
Specific: "That didn't go well"
Builds courage to try again

Gilbert's research separates *inadequate-self* and *hated-self* criticism from the capacity to reassure oneself.

02 What compassion means in CFT

Two psychologies: turning toward, and taking action

ENGAGEMENT · COURAGE

Turning toward suffering

Care for wellbeing

Sensitivity

Sympathy

Distress tolerance

Empathy

Non-judgement

A *sensitivity to suffering* in self and others, with a *commitment to try to relieve and prevent it*

Gilbert's definition, paraphrased

ACTION · WISDOM

Knowing what will help

Attention

Reasoning

Behaviour

Imagery

Sensory focus

Feeling

03 Three flows of compassion

Each can be blocked by fears of compassion

To others

Caring about others' suffering and helping.

Fear: being exploited or overwhelmed

From others

Being open to receiving care and kindness.

Fear: vulnerability; kindness can't be trusted

To self

Meeting our own distress with understanding.

Fear: it's weak, indulgent, or lowers standards

04 Compassionate Mind Training

Practices used in CFT to build the soothing system

Soothing rhythm breathing

Slowing and deepening the breath to settle the body.

The compassionate self

Stepping into a self with wisdom, strength and commitment.

Compassionate image

Imagining an ideal caring presence that wishes you well.

Safe place imagery

Creating a place in the mind that feels calm and welcoming.

Compassionate letter

Writing to yourself about a struggle, from your compassionate self.

What the research suggests. Reviews find CFT promising, especially for high self-criticism (Leaviss & Uttley, 2015; Craig et al., 2020). A 2023 meta-analysis of randomised trials found gains in self-compassion and self-reassurance versus controls; more long-term, high-quality research is needed (Millard et al., 2023).

Compassion isn't softness. It takes courage to turn toward suffering, and wisdom to help.

SOURCES

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