

Mindfulness for Wellbeing and Peak Performance



• WEEK 4: Developing Self-Compassion

How self-compassion impacts performance

DR RICHARD CHAMBERS: We've already explored how self-compassion has a number of benefits for our well-being by disconnecting the fight or flight response and reducing levels of amygdala arousal, adrenaline, cortisol, that kind of thing. And in fact, activating very different circuits in the brain, the [INAUDIBLE] circuits which are associated with the release of oxytocin and better well-being. But actually, self-compassion has a number of benefits for performance as well. Could you say a little bit about that Craig?

DR CRAIG HASSED: Yes. 'cause if we start to reflect on one of the ways that we try and drive performance, we often try and use self criticism, getting hard on ourselves, judging, criticising, which actually is very often a distraction, and it ingrains the very things that we're criticising. Now paradoxically, but interestingly, the research shows that when we're more mindful, we actually develop a little bit more self-compassion. But when we look at how that translates into performance, it changes things in some very interesting ways.

So for example, students who fail a test. If they can be a little bit more self-compassionate, they're more likely to actually get back on the horse and start, as it were, starting to improve their performance in that particular subject. Or if somebody makes a mistake in their lives, maybe does something that ethically disappoints them. Self-compassion is not about ignoring the problem but actually helps a person to look at it, to learn from the experience, and to be more motivated to try and not repeat that error again in the future.

Other things that suggest that for example, that a person's more likely to look at high role models if they're more able to be compassionate to themselves. And when people feel terrible about themselves, self-critical and judgmental, they often look very much towards lower role models instead of not embodying the things that that person might otherwise like to embody in their own life. So it helps people, as it were, to aim higher rather than lower, in terms of the behaviour and conduct. So there's some of the interesting ways and there have been others that have been explored as well.

DR RICHARD CHAMBERS: Mm-hm. It makes a lot of sense doesn't it? Often when people make mistakes, their attention gets very much caught up in things like self criticism and judgement. And of course, in that moment, their attention is, rather than being on the thing that they need to repair, or to fix, or to learn from, it's actually just caught up in something else. So just learning to bring our attention back to what's actually in front of us, of course, helps us to disconnect from that and to learn from our mistakes, to improve our performance.

DR CRAIG HASSED: And that sort of self-criticism and judgement is pretty much habituated for many of us much of the time. It shows itself up in mindfulness meditation. Oh, why do I keep going off and criticising and judging what's happening there as well?

And so it brings it to-- mindfulness brings that to our awareness. So even if we're doing that in our day to day life or during meditation, we can start to just notice it, just notice the presence of it, just notice the effect of it, just notice the effect that it has on how we feel, and how we function, how we behave. And if we start to notice that we realise it doesn't serve us very well and so that's, I think the very important first step or first phase as we develop self-compassion is to be able to be aware of what the current default or habitual patterns are.

DR RICHARD CHAMBERS: It's a very interesting thing actually. Often in the course, as we've done here at Monash, we quite often see students who have these very paradoxical experience of realising that they can simply bring their attention gently back from whatever has distracted them. And of course, that means that they didn't spend more time in the present moment rather than caught up worrying about something else. So their performance improves, but also, so does their mental health and well-being because they just become kinder to themselves.

DR CRAIG HASSED: And also at home or at work, so say, in the work environment, if we're trying to drive performance with criticism and judgement where people's stress are going up. What we actually do is we might lift people out of apathy if that's where they are, but very quickly, people go over into high levels of stress and performance is actually dropped. And so that kind of way of being very hard and critical actually is not a good long term strategy.

But equally in relationships, at home, for example, being critical of others doesn't necessarily help them to be more objective and reflective about their own experience. That really requires self-awareness, and that's really a trait of mindfulness. And so helping, whether it's in the workplace or at home, say for a parent with a child, or in school for teacher with a student, helping that person to notice what's going on for themselves, noticing the patterns of thought and behaviour they they're engaged in and to notice the impact of that can help a person to sort of learn from experience rather than just keep on repeating the same mistakes.

DR RICHARD CHAMBERS: Mm-hm. I know from my own experience that when I make a mistake and give myself a really hard time, that situation or experience becomes quite unpleasant. It literally takes on an unpleasant feeling or an unpleasant sense, and of course, I want to avoid it even more.

DR CRAIG HASSED: And it creates, very often, a sense of anticipation about is this going to come up again? And remembering such a negative or bad experience from the past and projecting that into the future.

DR RICHARD CHAMBERS: Mm-hm. And simply just from being present, just from bringing the attention back to what's actually happening and cultivating these attitudes like self compassion, friendliness towards ourselves, sometimes called loving kindness, actually just activates parts of the brain that are very different to the default circuits, the fight and flight circuits.

And a positive psychologist, Barbara Fredrickson is also showing that when we experience positive emotions, attention is much more flexible. And so a lot more behaviours are available for us. So we actually start to perform better by practicing things like self-compassion.