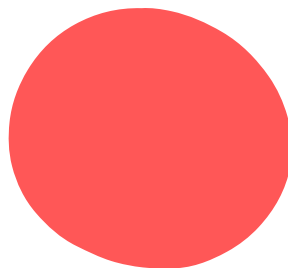
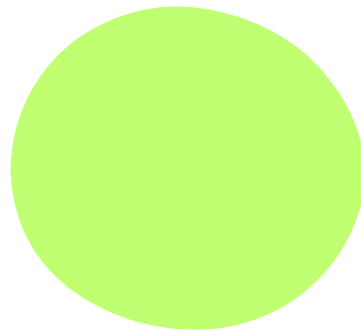
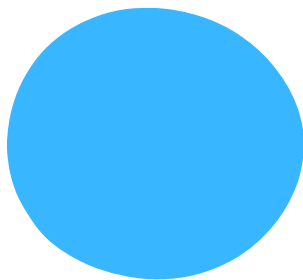


MINI-GUIDE

COMPASSION FOCUSED THERAPY
(CFT)

STAN STEINDL



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*May I be helpful,
rather than
harmful, towards
myself and other.*

PROFESSOR PAUL GILBERT



INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS CFT?

Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) is an evidence-based therapeutic approach developed by Professor Paul Gilbert. It's rooted in evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, psychological science, and the wisdom traditions. At its heart, CFT helps individuals understand and manage their emotions, particularly those linked to self-criticism and shame, by cultivating compassion for themselves and others.

To achieve this, CFT helps individuals to develop their own 'compassionate self'. This is the ideal compassionate version of you—a part of you that embodies wisdom, strength, courage, and care. CFT helps individuals connect with and develop their compassionate self so that it can serve as a steady and supportive companion throughout life's journey, guiding them through challenges and nurturing their emotional well-being.

This mini-guide will introduce you to the core principles of CFT and provide practical steps to start your compassion journey. Much more detail is available elsewhere (Gilbert & Simos, 2022; Irons & Beaumont, 2017; Kolts, 2016; Petrocchi et al., 2024; Steindl, 2020).

SECTION 1: THE EVOLUTIONARY MODEL

CFT is grounded in an evolutionary understanding of the human brain. Over millions of years, our brains have evolved to include a blend of "old brain" instincts and "new brain" functions.



While these features are exquisitely designed to support survival and human flourishing, they also come with trade-offs. Our brains can be tricky, often becoming sources of suffering through stress, anxiety, self-consciousness, and shame. Understanding these dynamics is key to fostering compassion and alleviating emotional struggles.

THE OLD BRAIN

The "old brain" houses instincts and survival mechanisms. It's responsible for basic drives like hunger, reproduction, protection from threats, and even a caring motivation. These functions were essential for early survival but can present challenges in the modern world. In many ways, our old brain remains largely unchanged from hundreds of thousands of years ago, yet we now face complex social systems and stressors that it was not designed to handle effectively.

THE NEW BRAIN

The "new brain" introduces higher-order functions such as reasoning, imagination, and planning, enabling us to reflect on our experiences, solve complex problems, and envision the future. However, these abilities can also create challenges: reasoning may turn into worry, and imagination into imagining fearful scenarios. This can lead the "new brain" to become entangled in worry, rumination, catastrophising, and self-criticism.



LOOPS IN THE MIND

Sometimes, the old and new brains don't align seamlessly. For example, we might imagine threats (new brain) that activate survival responses (old brain), even when no real danger exists. These loops can lead to heightened anxiety, self-criticism, and emotional struggles.

For instance, imagine someone preparing for a presentation at work. Their new brain envisions scenarios of failing, being judged harshly, or forgetting key points. This activates the old brain's threat response, creating physical symptoms like a racing heart or sweaty palms, which in turn reinforce the fearful thoughts. This loop can spiral, making the experience even more overwhelming.

CFT helps individuals understand these dynamics and work towards using their "new brain" to cultivate compassion, soothing the "old brain" when it reacts to perceived threats.



SECTION 2: THE THREE EMOTION REGULATION SYSTEMS

CFT explains our emotional experience using three systems that work together to help us survive and thrive. These systems are deeply connected to the old brain's motivations and emotions.

For instance, **the threat system** aligns with the old brain's survival mechanisms, driving responses like fight, flight, freeze, or appease. **The drive system** reflects the old brain's motivation to seek resources and rewards essential for survival. Meanwhile, **the soothing system** activates the caring motivation, creating a sense of safety and calm.

Understanding how these systems interact provides valuable insight into how our old brain influences emotions and behaviours, and it is key to developing compassion.

THE THREAT SYSTEM

Motives: Threat protection and safety seeking. Keeps us safe by detecting and responding to danger.

Feelings: Anxiety, anger, fear, self-consciousness, shame.

Activators: Especially social threats, such as criticism, rejection, and conflict.

THE DRIVE SYSTEM

Motives: Motivates us to seek rewards and achieve goals. Wanting, pursuing, obtaining.

Feelings: Excitement, pleasure, pride.

Activators: Accomplishments, recognition, success.

THE SOOTHING SYSTEM

Motives: Helps us feel safe, connected, and content. Affiliation, belonging, togetherness

Feelings: Calm, love, warmth, compassion.

Activators: Connection with others, kindness, support, mindfulness.

In modern life, the threat system often dominates, or we can find ourselves caught in threat-based drive, while the soothing system is underutilised.

For example, a person might overwork themselves (drive system) in response to fear of failure or rejection (threat system), leading to burnout and further reinforcing the cycle of stress and anxiety. Perfectionism is a clear example of threat-based drive.

Alternatively, the threat system might inhibit the drive system, such as when a person is so fearful of making an important phone call that they put it off for days or even weeks. This procrastination exemplifies how the drive system can be suppressed by the threat system.

This procrastination exemplifies how the drive system can be suppressed by the threat system. CFT focuses on strengthening the soothing system to create a better balance between these systems, fostering emotional resilience and well-being.

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Compassion is a sensitivity to suffering in self and others, with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it

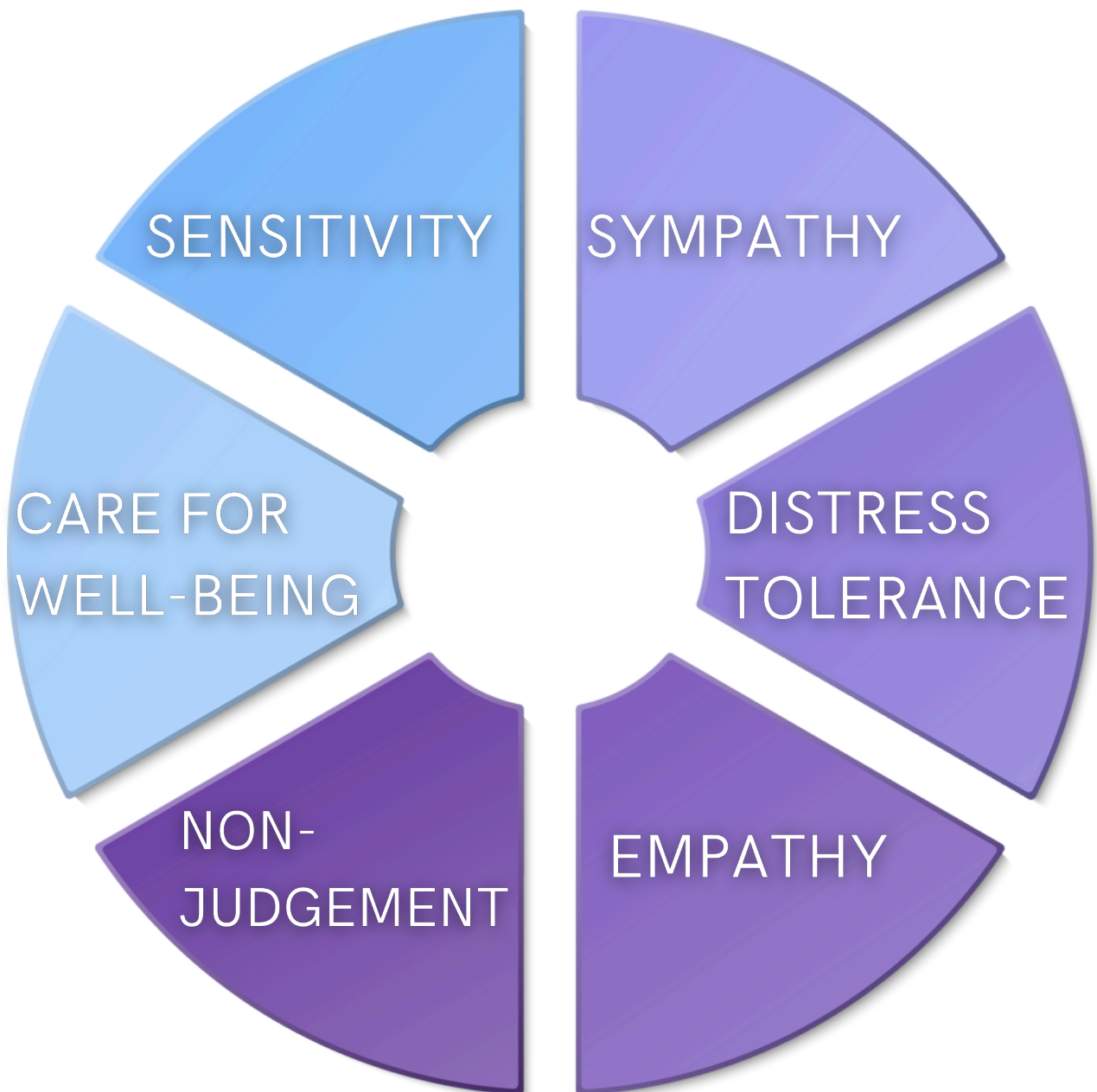
PROFESSOR PAUL GILBERT



SECTION 3: COMPASSION: DEFINITION, ATTRIBUTES, AND SKILLS

CFT defines compassion as a motivation to alleviate suffering. It’s not about being “soft” or “weak”—it’s a courageous and active response to challenges. Compassion is also about enhancing well-being and supporting human flourishing by nurturing the resources that allow individuals to thrive.

Compassion itself can be understood as an evolved aspect of human survival. Humans have always depended on social bonds to thrive. Our capacity for compassion—to care for and support each other—has been fundamental to the success of our species. This motivation to look after one another has not only ensured the survival of individuals within groups but also strengthened communities, fostering cooperation and shared resources. CFT draws on this evolutionary heritage, helping individuals tap into their innate ability to nurture themselves and others.



THE ATTRIBUTES OF COMPASSION

- Sensitivity:** Noticing suffering in yourself and others.
- Sympathy:** Feeling moved, and concerned for the sufferer.
- Distress Tolerance:** Staying present, and able to manage distress.
- Empathy:** Understanding the emotions behind the suffering.
- Non-Judgement:** Accepting, without blame or shame.
- Care for Well-being:** A motivation to be caring and helpful.



THE SKILLS OF COMPASSION

Mindfulness: Staying present and aware without judgement, even when faced with challenging emotions or difficult experiences, fostering a sense of calmness and composure, and flexibility of thought and feeling.

Soothing Rhythm Breathing: A calming, grounding breathing technique to activate the soothing system, slowing down both the body and the mind, creating a sense of warm-friendliness, emotional stability, and safety.

Compassionate Imagery: Visualising a compassionate figure or self, such as a compassionate friend, or an ideal compassionate version of you, who embodies warmth, strength, and understanding to support and guide you.

Compassionate Self-Talk: Replacing self-criticism with validating, reassuring, affirming and encouraging thoughts, reminding yourself of your strengths and focusing on constructive ways to grow and move forward.

Compassionate Embodiment and Action: Aligning your body, tone, and actions with wisdom, strength, courage and a caring-commitment, acting in line with your compassionate intentions, both towards yourself and others.

SECTION 4: PRACTICAL EXERCISES TO DEVELOP COMPASSION

SOOTHING RHYTHM BREATHING

- Sit comfortably with your feet flat on the ground and hands resting in your lap. Roll back your shoulders, open your chest, and lift your chin as if looking out towards the horizon.
- Breathe in through your nose for a count of 3, and exhale gently for a count of 3. Gradually slowing the breathing, in for 4 and out for 4, in for 5 and out for 5.
- Find a breathing rhythm that feels slowing and soothing for you. Focus on the gentle rhythm of your breath, imagining it as a warm wave of calm washing over you.

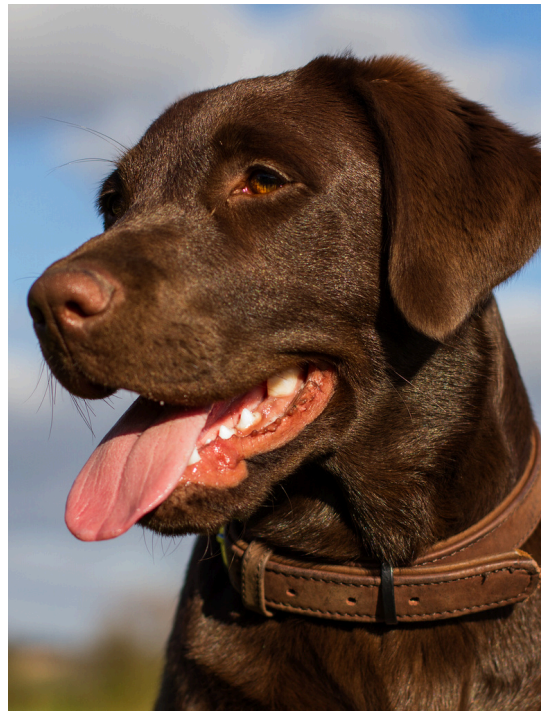
CALM PLACE IMAGERY

- Begin with soothing rhythm breathing to calm your body and mind, creating a sense of safety.
- Imagine a place where you feel peaceful and secure. This could be at home, near your home, further afield, such as a beach or mountain, somewhere you have visited, or even an imaginary place. Settle on a specific place and start to imagine the details of this location.
- Bring in all your senses: What can you see, hear, feel, smell, or even taste in this place? This is a place where you truly belong. It's almost as if the place is happy to see you and welcomes you there.
- Spend a few minutes exploring this calm place and creating details, big and small, to enrich the experience.



A compassionate friend is the presence within or imagined around us, who offers unconditional support, wisdom, and warmth, always encouraging us to find strength, and reminding us that we are worthy of care and understanding.

DR STAN STEINDL



COMPASSIONATE FRIEND EXERCISE

- Begin with soothing rhythm breathing to calm your body and mind, creating a sense of safeness. Engage in calm place imagery, visualising a location where you feel peaceful, secure and calm.
- Imagine a compassionate friend (it could be a person, animal, or abstract presence) who is wise, strong, courageous, and caring. This friend deeply loves you and genuinely wishes for your happiness.
- Picture this friend telling you something meaningful, just what you need to hear right now in your life. Have a conversation with your compassionate friend; they listen intently and understand you completely. Visualise your friend giving you a gift—an object that holds special meaning for you.
- As the compassionate friend departs, remind yourself that they are a part of you and can return whenever you wish for their comforting presence and words of compassion.

SOOTHING RHYTHM BREATHING

- Begin with soothing rhythm breathing to calm and steady your body and mind.
- Imagine the key qualities of compassion: wisdom, strength and courage, and a caring commitment.
- Even if you feel like you don't yet possess these qualities, simply imagine what it might be like if you already did.

WISDOM

Recognise that we all just find ourselves here with these tricky brains, designed by evolution and not by us. These brains generate various thoughts, feelings, urges, and desires—many of which we'd rather not have. But none of this is our fault; we're born with these tricky brains and then shaped by life experiences, which we also don't get to choose. Yet, we have the opportunity to learn about our brains and minds, and how to manage them.

STRENGTH AND COURAGE

Through soothing rhythm breathing and body-based practices, cultivate a sense of strength, groundedness, stability, and calmness. Develop emotional courage and confidence, fostering the determination and resilience needed to face life's challenges.

CARING-COMMITMENT

Embrace a commitment to be caring, supportive, encouraging, and helpful toward yourself and others, as well as opening up to others being caring towards you. Reflect on the intention: "May I be helpful, rather than harmful, to myself and others."

Having activated your compassionate self, reflect on what you feel motivated to do. What steps will you take to navigate your day, week, or life's journey with compassion?

PUTTING THE COMPASSIONATE SELF TO WORK WITH LIFE'S DIFFICULTIES

Compassionate Letter Writing:

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of your compassionate self or a wise and caring friend. Acknowledge your struggles, offer understanding, and provide encouragement and support.

Fostering Healthy Relationships:

Focus on assertiveness, boundary setting, and forgiveness to nurture connections that are respectful and compassionate, for yourself and others.

Working with Shame and Guilt:

Use your compassionate self to explore and address these complex emotions, fostering a sense of acceptance, accountability, and courage to move forward. Shame and guilt are distinct emotions, arising from different motivational systems, and they need to be worked with in unique ways to ensure effective healing and growth.

Bringing Compassion to Self-Criticism:

Recognise your self-critical thoughts and respond to them with understanding and kindness, reminding yourself of your inherent worth and capacity to grow. This involves moving away from a harsh, self-attacking style of self-criticism to a self-corrective, compassionate encouragement style of self-to-self relating. Instead of blaming or shaming, this approach helps you identify areas for improvement while offering support and reassurance to yourself, fostering growth and resilience.

Compassionate Chairwork:

Imagine sitting in different chairs as your critical self, your compassionate self, and your experiencing self. Engage in a dialogue where compassion helps resolve conflicts and supports your well-being.

SECTION 5: REAL LIFE APPLICATIONS OF CFT



SELF-CRITICISM, SHAME AND DEPRESSION: A CASE STUDY

Jane struggled with relentless self-criticism that fueled deep shame and recurring episodes of depression. Whenever she made a mistake, even a small one, she would berate herself harshly, thinking she was a failure who would never improve. This cycle of negative self-talk and feelings of worthlessness left Jane feeling trapped and hopeless.

Through CFT, Jane began practising soothing rhythm breathing to calm her body and mind during moments of self-criticism. She learned to imagine her compassionate self as a supportive and understanding inner voice. Using compassionate letter writing, Jane restructured her harsh self-talk into words of encouragement, reminding herself that everyone makes mistakes and that these can be valuable learning experiences. Over time, she developed a kinder relationship with herself, which helped her alleviate feelings of shame and reduced the intensity of her depressive episodes.

RELATIONSHIP STRUGGLES AND POOR BOUNDARIES: A CASE STUDY

David often found himself in relationships where he prioritised others' needs over his own, using appeasement strategies to avoid conflict.

He struggled to set boundaries, which led to feelings of resentment and emotional exhaustion.

Despite his efforts to keep the peace, his relationships felt unbalanced and unsatisfying.



CFT helped David understand the roots of his appeasement strategies, which were tied to his fear of rejection and a strong threat-system response. Using compassionate chairwork, he explored these fears and developed his compassionate self, which encouraged him to value his own needs. He practised assertiveness skills and boundary setting, guided by the principle of being helpful rather than harmful to himself and others. As a result, David began building healthier, more fulfilling relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.



PERFECTIONISM, STRESS AND BURNOUT: A CASE STUDY

Sarah was a high-achieving professional who constantly worked long hours, driven by a perfectionistic fear of failure.

She often felt she wasn't doing enough, despite her accomplishments, and this relentless striving left her on the brink of burnout. Her stress was compounded by feelings of guilt whenever she tried to rest or take time for herself.

In CFT sessions, Sarah learned to recognise how her threat and drive systems were dominating her emotional experience. Practising soothing rhythm breathing and compassionate embodiment exercises, she cultivated a sense of stability and emotional resilience. She also used compassionate imagery to visualise her compassionate self supporting her through difficult tasks. By integrating self-compassion into her daily life, Sarah began to prioritise self-care without guilt, allowing her to find a healthier balance between work and rest, ultimately protecting her from burnout.

REFLECTION WORKSHEET 1

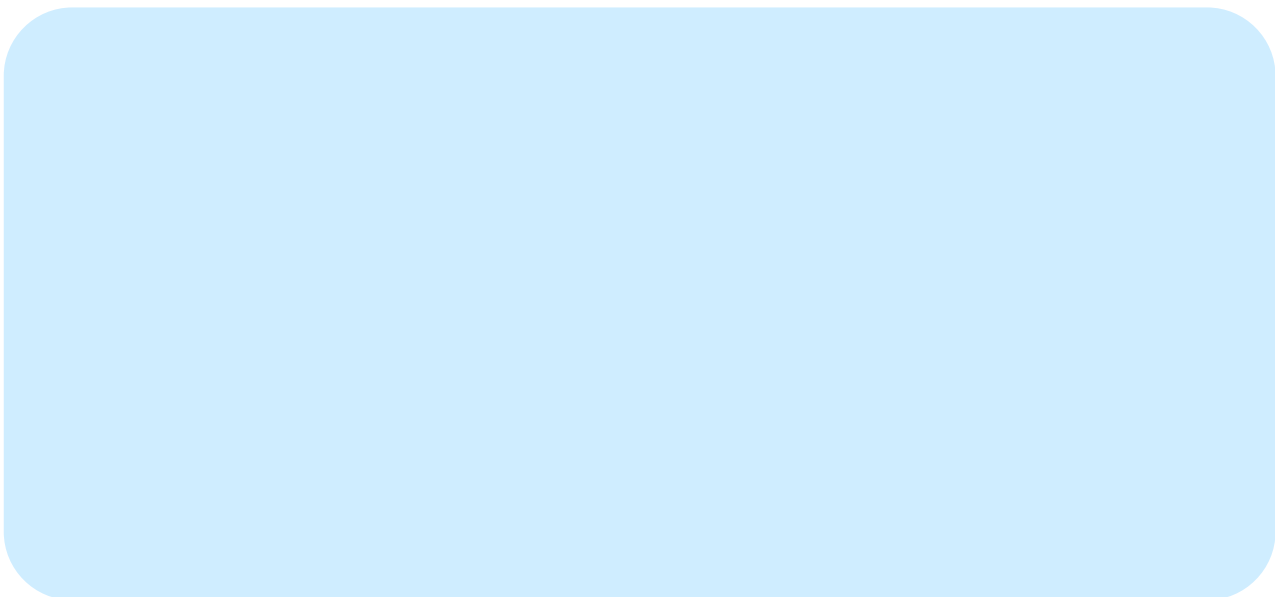
Loops in the Mind

Reflecting on the Evolutionary Model of CFT on Page 4, what loops in the mind do you notice yourself experiencing from time to time?



Three Emotion Regulation Systems

Reflecting on the Threat, Drive and Soothing Systems on Page 6, use the space below to draw three circles, red, blue and green respectively, to depict how activated each of those systems generally are for you.



REFLECTION WORKSHEET 2

Attributes of Compassion

Reflecting on the Attributes of Compassion on Page 8, do you feel you need to work most on sensitivity, sympathy, distress tolerance, empathy, non-judgement or care of well-being to best support you compassion? How might you go about it?

Compassionate Friend Exercise

Reflecting on the Compassionate Friend Exercise on Page 11, describe how your compassionate friend might appear for you. Is your compassionate friend human or animal? Represented by someone you know or someone from books or movies? Or is it a religious figure? Write a few notes on how you would like your compassionate friend to appear.

REFLECTION WORKSHEET 3

Takeaways

Having read through the Mini-Guide to Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT), what are three takeaways that you would like to remember, reflect upon, or put into practice?

1

2

3

Commitments

Given all of this, what are the steps you commit to taking next, to bring more compassion into your home, work or life?

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Compassion and self-compassion can transform lives!

DR STAN STEINDL



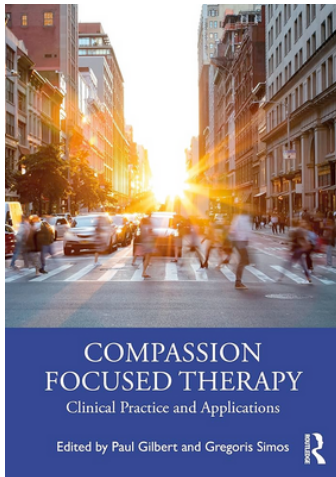
CONCLUSION: START YOUR COMPASSIONATE JOURNEY

Compassion Focused Therapy offers a pathway to healing and resilience. By understanding the three emotion regulation systems, cultivating compassion's attributes and skills, and practising simple exercises, you can begin transforming your relationship with yourself and others.

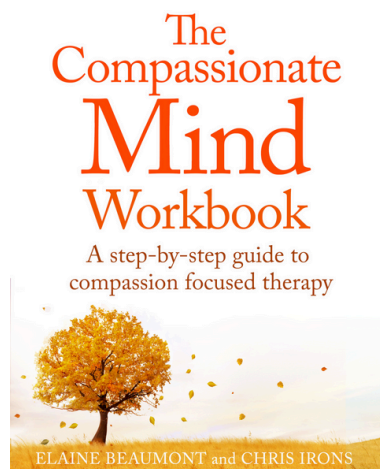
If you found this guide helpful, subscribe to Compassion in a T-Shirt, available on [YouTube](#) and [Podcast](#), for more resources, tools, and interviews with leading experts in compassion science.

For links and more information, visit
<https://www.stansteindl.com/>

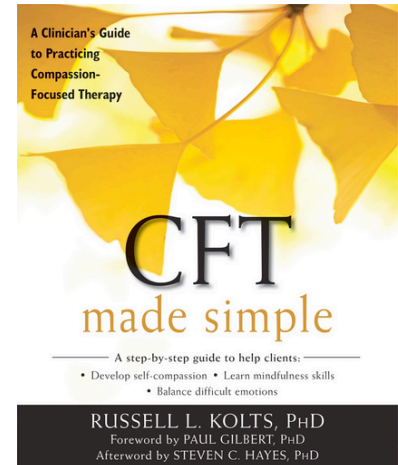
SUGGESTED READING



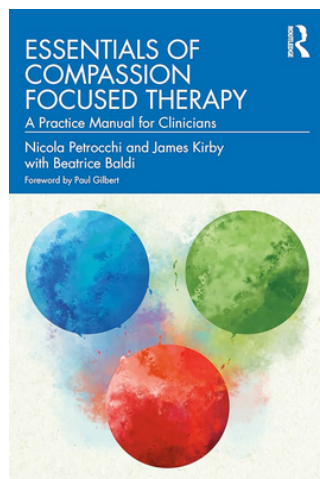
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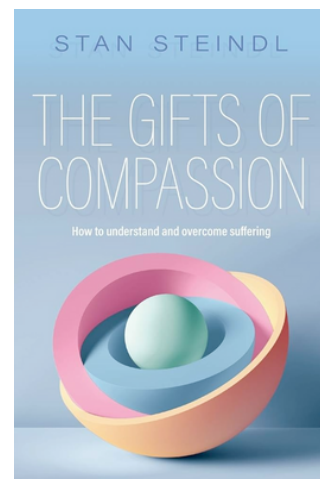
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