
Self-compassion as an Antidote to Social Distancing at Work

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Abstract

As pandemics force governments to mandate social distancing that affects business operations, companies try to learn how to stay afloat and keep employees productive in case of an unexpected physical separation. This paper proposes to promote, learn, and practice self-compassion at times of unexpected social distancing at work. It is designed to apply research on compassion in general, and self-compassion in particular, to the critical business-continuation goals of keeping employees healthy and happy while separated due to pandemics and other disruptive events. We highlight selected research on compassion and self-compassion and then bring to focus the need for self-compassion learning and developmental interventions as possible venues to foster employee well-being and counter the drawbacks of forced social distancing. This paper illuminates a currently relevant workplace benefit of self-compassion and offers practical recommendations for cultivating it at work.

Keywords: self-compassion, social distancing, work arrangement, COVID-19, employee well-being, OD



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INTRODUCTION

Keeping employees happy and healthy benefits organizations on many levels. One way to do that is to foster their senses of purpose and belonging through social connectedness and compassion (Dutton, Lilius, & Kanov, 2007; Worline & Dutton, 2017). A recent pandemic, however, has brought into a full view the reality of forced social distancing at work. It also presented an opportunity for employers to learn how to help employees to reconnect with their inner selves, if social connections with others are forcibly minimized. This paper therefore addresses a practical business dynamic of dealing with social distancing at work through self-compassion (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003a).

The kind of distancing many of us were told to maintain was physical in nature, but it deprived millions of employees and managers of the work-related socializing that a number of us took for granted (Aalai, 2020). The loss of personal touch in everyday work life can feel saddening and sometimes unbearable, especially for those who enjoy in-person collegiality or find it inviting or more productive. The reaffirming smiles and helpful remarks of friendly peers were suddenly gone. The benefit of reading the superiors' body language or asking for immediate performance feedback has disappeared into the formality of virtual meetings. While the emotional and physical toll of forced social distancing can be palpable for many, we propose that self-compassion can serve as an antidote (Hall et al., 2012), and we offer practical suggestions for managers and their employees.

COMPASSION AND SELF-COMPASSION AT WORK

While compassion is generally recognized as a basic and positive social emotion (Dutton *et al.*, 2006; Nussbaum, 1996), organizational researchers often treat compassion as a process of noticing and empathizing with someone else's pain and then acting to alleviate it (e.g., Kanov, Powley, & Walshe, 2017). Compassion is seen as helpful during organizational change and development initiatives (Avramchuk, Manning, & Carpino, 2013), instrumental in the processes of organizing around someone's plight (Dutton *et al.*, 2006), and beneficial to the intended recipients when practiced by executives (Avramchuk & Manning, 2014). Workplace acts of compassion are also known to positively influence the giver (Dutton, Lilius, & Kanov, 2007; Kukk, 2017; Worline & Dutton, 2017). However, compassion is primarily – whether at its basic level or in the context of work – an other-oriented emotion, concept or process.

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Self-compassion, on the other hand, is directed toward oneself. Neff (2003a,b) developed the concept of self-compassion alongside three main elements: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, with the following characteristics.

Self-kindness

When a personal failure, pain or suffering strikes, one can be said to practice self-kindness by understanding and being kind to oneself and not engaging in self-criticism to a high degree.

Common humanity

Common humanity refers to one's seeing their experiences in a larger human context and not as separate and isolating.

Mindfulness

As it relates to self-compassion, mindfulness is about one's ability to maintain a balanced awareness of – but not to over-identify with – their painful experiences.

FOSTERING SELF-COMPASSION TO MITIGATE SOCIAL DISTANCING AT WORK

Unexpected social isolation, such as during the coronavirus pandemic (Aalai, 2020), disturbs the strength of social-organizational fabric that people weave for themselves for years. On the surface level, the smiles and confidence are gradually wiped out from the faces of otherwise healthy and happy workers. Many who are vulnerable to psychological challenges are dealing with even deeper consequences of the extra stressor of lockdown in addition to keeping up with work demands. Some fall farther into the anxious or depressive states that, in turn, affect their work output. About a third of the UK workers with full-time jobs, for example, may be experiencing mental health issues even under normal circumstances, and a third of those have not sought professional help (Sikafi, 2019).

There are exercises, though, that can help employees experience self-compassion, and some online exercises have been proven to be effective in doing so and even contributing to increasing happiness and decreasing depression (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010). Bardard and Curry (2011) provided a comprehensive review of how self-compassion is being conceptualized, invoked, and fostered. Neff and Germer (2013) additionally demonstrated some benefits of mindfulness in relation to fostering self-compassion and referenced a long tradition in associating mindful practices (e.g., meditation) with psychological well-being.

Current research also indicates that the three elements of self-compassion are intertwined and work well together (Hall et al., 2012). It may not be easy to always recognize and prioritize which element contributes to the most impactful benefit. To dissect the harmony of self-compassion's components may be counterproductive and missing the point of its natural synergy. The good news is that "self-compassion is teachable and that higher levels of self-compassion are related to higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction and subjective happiness" (Eirini & Anastasios, 2017, p. 546).

Based on our preliminary synthesis of literature, we attempt to apply here some takeaways to business practice in today's unusual work settings. While realizing a tentative nature of this iteration of time-sensitive analysis, we nevertheless assume that it is critical to address the currency of ongoing crisis to which the world's business dynamics have bowed. The following recommendations and qualitative self-narratives could be useful for employees and managers who are interested in mitigating the downsides of forced social distancing at work, as long as it is understood that a collective of these recommendations might work best together.

Practical Recommendations for Managers

1. Make online exercises fostering self-compassion available to all employees. Do not try to identify and target those who have mental-health challenges. Research shows that employees are already skeptical of workplace confidentiality and are likely not going to open up about their psychological needs.
2. Communicate early and often your sincere understanding of employees' plight in dealing with social distancing. Do not assume that employees enjoy being separated and out of their office environment. Research is clear on the benefits of high-quality connections, and these connections are significantly

disturbed at times of social distancing and lockdowns. Help employees maintain these connections and make it okay to care about each other on a distance.

3. Design company-sponsored interventions to invoke and sustain self-compassion in your workforce. Do it as part of your ongoing organization-development efforts, even if the employees are back at the office. Research indicates that well-designed and facilitated programs to learn and practice self-compassion produce sustained positive effects for at least six months after their completion. Engaging in these interventions now may help your employees be prepared for any unexpected separation later and be happier, healthier and more productive.

What Do We Say to Each Other at This Time? A Research-based Reflection

While conducting research for this paper and learning about the benefits of fostering self-compassion, we used role-play as a common organization-development (OD) and pedagogical technique for reflecting on new learning (Cummings & Worley, 2005; Kilgour et al., 2015). Working in the educational and healthcare settings, respectively, we both were subjected to the employer-driven social distancing measures and used this unique experience as a context for our scholarly inquiry and reflection. In the best tradition of OD practice, we share below a focused set of composite narratives for what we said to each other as colleagues, based on what we learned:

1. Be kind to yourself. Social distancing mandated by your employer or health officials is not your fault. Being overly self-critical for what is going on under these tough conditions may not be fair to you. Part of being kind to yourself is seeking the opportunities to learn about and practice self-compassion.

2. Remember that you are not alone. Your employer's and health authorities' resources are available to you and to many friends and colleagues who experience what you do. Social distancing is part of our common life, and we all contribute to making it better for each other.

3. Realize that social distancing is not your full life. Our real difficulties during separation are only a part of our experience and perhaps not a big part on most days. We have so much else to think about and do in what we uniquely know and accomplish as professionals. Contemplate about a proper place of your current experience in the overall picture of your life. Be open to consulting other professionals who specialize in helping you get through such experiences with care.

A Note on Implementation

Implementation details tailored for each organization and individual depend on many personal and cultural factors and are, of course, beyond the confines of this short paper. Our goal was to start the practical conversation in the middle of COVID-19 pandemic and put self-compassion firmly in the mix of developing countermeasures for social distancing at work. Individual employees are always best served by their health professionals and established self-care guides, but our self-narratives above may facilitate their seeking of specific assistance to develop and practice self-compassion. Employers, however, have a responsibility to care for their workforces (Biswas & Suar, 2016; Bodie, 2016; Gensby et al., 2019) and can deploy what we recommended in consultation with the organization development specialists and other local experts and health authorities.

CONCLUSION

Social distancing and lockdowns prompt organizations to learn how to keep employees well and productive while in separation. Our paper introduced a novel way of thinking about the benefits of self-compassion in isolation during pandemics and other disruptive events. We synthesized some relevant research on compassion and self-compassion to open a conversation and offer initial recommendations for focusing on self-compassion learning and development at work.

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