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SELF-COMPASSION BREAKS

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Practice Daily Friendliness (to Yourself)

There are multiple opportunities to befriend yourself throughout the day. Perhaps in difficult moments when you ask what you need, you might hear a voice that says, I want to be healthy, or I want to feel safe, or I want to feel at ease. A self-compassion break may be to place your hand on your heart and repeat the phrase to yourself of what you need. For example, if you need to be more at ease, you can take a few deep breaths and say in your mind, "May I be at ease." This is not an affirmation. You're not saying you are at ease; you simply wish it for yourself, which is an act of caring and self-compassion.

You can also use a self-compassion break to send the difficult people in your life these same friendly wishes. You can picture them in your mind and practice saying, "May you be happy, be healthy, be more at ease, and be free from fear." Difficult people in life trigger stress and tension in us. But when they do, the one who suffers is us, not them. Wishing these people to be more at ease, to be happier, to be healthy, or to be free from fear can help us release the negative feelings that live inside of us. If you're having trouble seeing the logic in this, consider that if a difficult person in your life felt more at ease, happy, safe, and healthy, he or she might not be as irritating. Slide beneath the judgments about whether this will or won't be effective for you and let your experience be your teacher.

Pretend to Laugh a Little

Sometimes we just need to laugh. Plenty of studies point to the stress-reducing and antidepressant qualities of humor and laughter. If depression is an experience of closing down, laughter is a physical experience of opening up that releases endorphins—substances in the brain that are associated with feeling good. This also activates the body, which is often more dormant when depressed and can be a good, gentle aerobic exercise. It promotes the left prefrontal cortex shift that is associated

with positive emotions and resiliency. Laughter also helps bring us to the present moment, disengaging from an active depressive loop.

Laughter is also prone to emotional contagion perhaps because we have mirror neurons in our brains that mimic the experience of others that we see. Some scientists believe that mirror neurons are why we may yawn after seeing another person yawn or even how we experience empathy. The same goes for laughing. When we see others laughing, we tend to laugh ourselves. In fact, you can just pretend to laugh for a while, and you might notice that you start laughing naturally.

This is the basis behind a large, growing movement called laughter yoga. Laughter yoga was started in the mid-1990s by Indian physician Madan Kataria. He believed that laughter was a form of physical exercise that has tremendous psychological and physiological benefits that counter anxiety and depression. It starts with just beginning to laugh, making eye contact, and being playful, and eventually erupts into real laughter. The underlying philosophy is that the body can't tell the difference between fake laughter and real laughter, and the same psychological benefits follow. It has become so popular that it now has over six thousand social laughter clubs in over sixty countries.

Try the following experiment: watch the three-minute video Benefits of Laughter Yoga with John Cleese on YouTube, and see how long it takes before you crack a smile or even laugh. When we smile and have more laughter in our lives, you can imagine that left prefrontal shift countering depressive symptoms and fostering resiliency.

Of course, you can choose other forms of humor, such as your favorite comic strip or the funny antics of animals. Laughter yoga just makes it social, because there are other people involved, even if it's just watching a group of people doing it. When the mind gets a bit too serious, adding laughter to our day as a physical exercise can be a wonderful self-compassion break.

Optimize Your Social Network

The fact is that some people in our lives are nourishing and some are depleting. With whom do you spend most of your time? Who is most nourishing, and who is most depleting? Are you spending more hours with depleting people or nourishing people?

How can you make more contact with those who support your health and well-being? These days we have so many options, whether in person or by way of online social networks, text, chat, email, or phone. A self-compassion break might entail reaching out to someone who nourishes your spirit.

There are also times when we have no choice but to engage with people or activities that are depleting. The question then becomes, what ways might we relate differently to these people or activities to make them less draining? For example, rather than spending your mental energy hating a difficult person, you can make a shift and try to engage in an informal loving-kindness practice. This is where you take those friendly wishes I mentioned earlier and silently wish them for a series of people, including yourself. Most of us spend enough time focusing on what we don't like about ourselves, other people, or the world. This creates an imbalance and feeds the depression loop. Practicing a more compassionate awareness not only brings balance, but also, as you've learned, science shows that it also serves as a natural antidepressant. You don't have to like someone to wish him or her well, and we can all get better at realizing the common humanity that ties us together.