

Cultivating Self-Compassion to Help Your Client Heal from Shame

Bonus #2:

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with Dennis Tirch, PhD

Dr. Vigil-Otero: Welcome to this bonus, *When the Inner Critic is the Voice of an Abuser*. What happens when the inner critic is an internalized voice, an internalized attitude of a past abuser? We really wanted to share that with you, so we're going to do that in this bonus. And he's also going to touch on chair-work, which is another component of CFT that's very important. Now, here's Dennis.

How to Integrate Chair Work in Compassion-Focused Therapy

Dr. Tirch: But every once in awhile, you'll come across someone doing chair-work or role-plays or just in the therapeutic dialogue, that has an internalized abusive presence that is hateful and destructive. And that is a particularly good example for when we want to help someone cultivate fierce compassion and inner resolve, to really stand up with great authority to this internalized potentially destructive force within their heart and mind. So whereas in a role-play, the compassionate self might say to an inner critic something like, "I understand that you've been trying to push John, and you need to know that it's not working, that you're grinding him down and you're hurting him, and I need you to stop." That attitude, not the word-for-word script, like cognitive intervention, but embodying, "I get it, you're getting your job wrong, we need you to stand down." Understanding, not fighting that inner critic.

But if you're coming across someone who says, as their inner critic, "I just want to kill him, I want to grind him down because he's dirt. He deserves to be punished, just to hurt him. I want to hurt him." Well, that's a tell that what you're dealing with is contempt and hatefulness and very often retrauma, reemergence of traumatic presence, a memory of a traumatic other, a traumatically dysregulating, shaming other. And in those cases, you might even role-play yourself sitting in the chair next to the compassionate self. I've seen Tobyn Bell, who does great chair-work in the CFT world, and he did this at our summit and retreat, that we're standing between the experiencer and this critic, and we're telling the critic, "You don't do this anymore. You do not get to cause harm and pain and hurtfulness here. You are not in charge, and we're in charge." A real, assertive "no," being able to say "no," and strong, protective, powerful kind of presence.

So I always like to mention that when we're doing work on relational trauma, Type Two PTSD and chronic shame, because people need to know that they can have that resolve to really be

a strong, protective, authoritative advocate for themselves and not to get tangled up with a submissive stance to an internalized abuser. We don't want to collude with that. We'll model it, but we'll also help someone in the reflection on the early chair-work when someone begins to encounter this voice, we'll ask them, "Where in their life that came from? What's behind that? What's inside that? Does that remind you of anyone in your life? Does that relate to the abuse that you've described to me?"

So if we encounter a part of a person that seems to be reminiscent of a cruel internalized abusive presence, we can debrief and reflect on that, and then we can prepare the further chair-work or further narrative work or further role-play and imagery to imagine this sort of fierce or yang side of compassion. What would that look like? What would that protector look like, you know? And it's really interesting, because it's not meant to be someone who can really engage in combat, to me anyway, with my clients. It's not like, "We're going to get in the mud and fight this abuser." It's an absolute, resolute, powerful protector, like the Terminator, or one of these strong, wrathful Buddhas, or like Archangel Michael, for someone I knew who was of Irish Catholic background, this kind of presence that is absolute, strong, protective, and no one is going to hurt you in the presence of this compassionate being. And that can be very, very powerfully healing. A few people even described that as redemptive, which is an interesting adjective. Feeling like a part of themselves is being reclaimed from profound shame that can follow severe or chronic abuse.

The Power of Role-Play in Silencing the Inner Critic

One of the things that I find really interesting in role-playing with clients is that people are much more comfortable attacking themselves than attacking you, as their therapist, even if they know that it's a role-play. So if I ask someone to tell me all the things that their inner critic would say to them, and then I ask them to role-play saying those same things to me, looking me in the eyes and saying, "Dennis, you're a piece of garbage, you're worthless, et cetera." That often sort of softens the equation, just in the beginning. And then we can build on those perspective-taking kinds of repertoires. We can ask them what it would be like to "be me, to be their therapist, hearing them criticize themselves."

And I'll be the critic. I'll ask them to really imagine what it's like. We do a little induction,

breathing, and then they open their eyes and I'll become them and say, you know, "It's embarrassing to even be here and talk about this stuff. This is weak, this is just disgusting. I'm disgusted with myself." And ask them to be sort of open to it, receptive to it. From there, and what I'm trying to illustrate here is the flexibility in your methods you can use. You can role-play this where the client is speaking to you like you are them. You can role-play this where they are you, hearing you, as them, beat themselves up. You can use letter-writing, slowing down and letter-writing, where they write the letter from their critical self for five minutes, and then they write a letter from the compassionate self for five minutes.

Compassionate Letter Writing as a Tool to Combat the Inner Critic

One of the most powerful things I've seen happen in groups and in psychotherapy training is people pairing up, looking at each other eyeball-to-eyeball and taking turns discussing some of their criticisms of themselves, and allowing the other partner to be moved by their suffering and by their shame, then switching roles so both people have heard the criticism. And then having each partner write down the letter from their inner critic, and then write down the letter from their compassionate self, again, a few minutes writing the critic letter, coming back to mindfulness and stillness, a few minutes writing the compassion letter, coming back to stillness, then they switch letters.

So, if it were me and you, I would be reading your critic letter, all the things you can imagine. If you're watching this, you can imagine the things you might write in your letter to yourself as your own inner critic and imagine how painful it is sometimes to write that. And imagine if you heard it coming from me, I was your partner in the exercise. And then, hearing the compassionate self coming from me. Hearing the genuine care, the genuine concern, and then debriefing around this. And I've seen groups of therapists, even though that exercise maybe is a 20-minute, maybe half an hour exercise, there was a group in Italy who just didn't go to lunch. They just debriefed around it. They were hugging each other, crying, and just opening up and being like, "It hurts so much to hear you treat yourself that way, the things you've been putting yourself through," and people just really opening up.

Because we often say in compassion work that you can look for the emotion that at first is not in the room. Someone might be very anxious on the surface, but, there's a lot of anger there.

They're more comfortable being anxious than feeling angry. And then underneath that anger, very, very often, is a lot of grief. A lot of sadness, sadness about what it's like to live a life feeling shamed and blamed and condemned in your own mind and on your own heart, and sadness about people maybe who weren't there for you in your life, or people who were there for you in ways that were painful, just that human grief. And when that grief unfreezes, there's a lot of things that can become possible in life. All of this work is leading to a great context of centered, mindful, compassionate acceptance of our actual emotions, our actual, essential humanity. And when you get there, it's a transformational process, often for everyone concerned.

Dr. Vigil-Otero: As you can see, Dennis uses a lot of experiential methods. It might be chair-work, it might be letter-writing. What he's ultimately trying to do is help the client move towards a more compassionate intention, a more compassionate place, and one that really involves self-acceptance.

Now, none of these things happen overnight. Clearly, in the work with these more complex patients, it's going to take some time, but Dennis's point to us was that in time, in helping the patient move towards a more compassionate version of themselves, real long-lasting change can occur.