

Compassionate Other Dialogue

The compassionate other or ‘perfect nurturer’ imagery is a practice used in Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT). The practice encourages individuals to imagine a being that personifies compassion as a means to generate and receive compassionate care. Compassionate other chairwork combines this imagery practice with chairwork processes, allowing for the embodiment of the compassionate other.

Process of dialogue:

1). The facilitator invites the individual to identify the kind of person or being they would want to support them with their difficulties (and what kind of compassionate qualities or characteristics this being would have).

Facilitator: “What kind of person would you need to help you through your low mood?”

2). The facilitator invites the individual to imagine an ideal compassionate person or being that personifies the desired compassionate qualities and characteristics and to picture them in an additional empty chair. The individual is encouraged to describe their compassionate other and their emotional reactions to this presence.

Facilitator: “Imagine your compassionate other in the chair. What do you see?”

3). The facilitator invites the individual to change seats and to embody the role of the compassionate other. The individual is encouraged to adopt the mindset and perspective of the compassionate other, recreate the posture and facial expression of this being, and to bring awareness to how it feels to be the compassionate other. The client can also be encouraged to practice their soothing rhythm breathing to get into role.

Facilitator: “Stepping into the shoes of your compassionate self, notice how it feels”

4). In the role of the compassionate other, the individual is encouraged to focus on the original chair (now empty) and imagine seeing a version of themselves experiencing their difficulties.

Facilitator: “Tell me what you see- how do you know he is upset?”

5). In the role of the compassionate other, the individual is supported to generate compassion towards themselves in the empty chair. It can be helpful to include the following:

- Witnessing (‘I can see you are feeling anxious; I know you are scared’)
- Empathic understanding (‘It makes sense you are feeling this way because...’)
- Statements of sympathy (‘Seeing you this way makes me feel...’)
- Clarification of motivation (‘I want to help you...I want you to feel...’)

- Messages of encouragement or reassurance ('You are safe now....')
- Redirection of attention ('Focus on what you can do...Remember that...')
- Compassionate reasoning ('Feeling this way doesn't mean that...It's not your fault')

Facilitator: "As the compassionate other, help him understand why he might feel so sad..."

6.) The facilitator invites the individual to return to the original chair and experience the care of the compassionate other. As the facilitator it can be helpful to repeat the salient messages from the compassionate other, so the individual can hear them as 'receiver'. The individual is encouraged to connect emotionally to the messages and to articulate their experience of receiving care. This can include the sharing of any fears, blocks, or resistances to such compassion, or any additional support they would like from their compassionate other.

Facilitator: "What is it like to be cared for in this way?"

7.) The facilitator invites the individual to return to the compassionate other chair and to embody the role. As the compassionate other, the individual offers additional care and support and addresses any fears, blocks, or resistances to compassion.

Facilitator: "Why does it make sense that he minimises his distress and says it doesn't matter? From what you know about him, where does that come from?"

8.) The facilitator invites the individual to change seats and receive the care of the compassionate other. Depending on the individual's need, the process of moving between chairs/roles, and the giving and receiving of compassion, can be repeated. The exercise ends by a debriefing of roles and a reflection on the individual's experiences and learning.

Facilitation notes:

- It can help to preface the chairwork by asking the individual about a specific difficulty they would like help with and the kind of person they would like to support them with this difficulty. This can help individuals to clarify the kind of qualities and characteristics they would want or need in the compassionate other and makes the exercise more relevant and authentic (i.e., you are more likely to generate qualities such as strength and commitment)
- The creation of the compassionate other image can be undertaken before the chairwork session (i.e., in a previous session and practiced for homework). The chairwork session then provides an opportunity to embody the image and engage in role-reversal (moving between the compassionate other and the self who requires support).
- The compassionate other is typically a fantastical creation: an imagined person or being that is 'perfect for you'. It can, however, be helpful to encourage individuals to develop

multiple compassionate others and grow a 'compassionate team'. The individual might want to use a friend or family member, and this can be encouraged as part of the 'team'.

- When facilitating the expression of compassion from the compassionate other, it can be helpful if the facilitator uses first-person statements ('doubling') rather than asking questions - this helps the individual find language for compassion, gives permission/encouragement for deeper expression, and prevent over-intellectualisation. For example, rather than asking the question, "Do you feel sad?", the facilitator might offer a statement like, "If it fits, try saying, 'I feel sad'". Doubling statements should be offered tentatively and be open to correction and adaptation by the individual.
- If individuals get stuck, they can be encouraged to use the facilitator as the compassionate 'other'. This can involve the individual shifting chairs, sitting next to the facilitator, and taking on their role and perspective. The facilitator and individual can then co-create a compassionate voice, with the facilitator scaffolding and 'doubling' for the individual.
- When generating compassion from the compassionate other, it can help to start with witnessing the distress and difficult experiences in the self on the other chair. This might involve noticing and naming the kind of thoughts and feelings identified in the self in the other chair. Such witnessing practices foster empathy and mentalisation, as well as building up the levels of affiliative warmth and care in a graded manner.
- The fears, blocks, and resistances (FBRs) to compassion experienced during the exercise can be used as a further target for compassion. Focusing on the origins and adaptive history of such FBRs can lead to further compassionate insights and the identification of unmet needs and vulnerabilities.
- The expressions of the compassionate other can be audio recorded and used as an auditory flashcard outside of session. A homework task might also include capturing the expressions of the compassionate other in the form of letter writing.

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For further chairwork guidelines and facilitation notes visit
www.chairwork.co.uk