



# **Self-Reflection on the Journey of Becoming a Teacher of Mindful Self-Compassion**

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“If we want to grow as teachers -- we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives -- risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.”

— *Parker J. Palmer*  
*The Courage to Teach:*  
*Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*

## **Welcome to the Process of Becoming a Teacher of the Mindful Self-Compassion Program**

This document represents the culmination of a great deal of reflection and experience in training teachers of mindfulness and compassion-based programs, including substantial hours spent in consultation with teachers in training of the Mindful Self-Compassion program.

Our intention is to provide some points to ponder and reflect upon that will prepare you for the profound experience of teaching MSC, as well as to potentially enhance and deepen your teaching of the program, for the benefit of everyone who might take the course from you.

Please take the time to read and reflect on the writings in this booklet at a pace that is right for you. Each piece is intended to be read and reflected upon at a certain point in the process of becoming a teacher, and we invite you to not rush ahead to read later portions when you could use that valuable time to go a bit deeper with the material assigned for where you happen to be.

Note below the various documents included in this booklet and when you are advised to read and reflect on them. And when you are given an opportunity to share your process and discoveries, remember to do so with the utmost concern for self-compassion and self-care, only revealing what you feel comfortable sharing, but looking deeply and carefully at all of what you encounter and sharing what you feel is important or worth exploring.

### Self Reflection Table of Contents

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<b>Pre-Teacher Training .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>“On Becoming a MSC Teacher: A Mountaineer’s Guide to Building the Resource of Mindful Self-Compassion”</i> is intended to begin to prepare prospective teachers for the full experience of teaching the MSC program. Prospective teachers are asked to read the piece and write about their reflections on it as part of their formal application to attend teacher training.	
<b>Pre-MSA Teaching .....</b>	<b>6</b>
“Self-Reflection on the Journey of Becoming a Teacher of Mindful Self-Compassion” is intended to set the stage for one’s first teaching experience, by directing attention inwardly to one’s sense of where one is in the process of becoming a teacher, and to set the stage for the continuing process of self-reflection and self-awareness required of MSC teachers.	
<b>Post-MSA Teaching .....</b>	<b>19</b>
“A Compassionate and Careful Reflection on Embodiment While Teaching MSC” is a piece aimed at those who have taught one or more MSC courses and would like to reflect on their experience from a variety of perspectives.	
<b>Appendix: MBI-TAC for MSC .....</b>	<b>27</b>

## **On Becoming a MSC Teacher: A Mountaineer’s Guide to Building the Resource of Mindful Self-Compassion**

In order to make an informed choice about whether MSC Teacher Training is right for you at this time, the following is offered for your consideration:

MSC is primarily designed to build the emotional resource of mindful self-compassion. It is a mindfulness-*based* program – mindfulness is the foundation of self-compassion – but MSC is primarily self-compassion training rather than mindfulness training. In that regard, MSC orients somewhat more toward the suffering “self” rather than the details of moment-to-moment experience. Also, MSC is therapeutic but it isn’t traditional therapy insofar as we focus more on resource building rather than on healing old wounds. Old wounds are often healed as we develop the strength to be with ourselves in an openhearted way, but that isn’t our primary agenda.

MSC teacher training is a professional training that builds on both personal and professional skills. To eventually teach MSC to others, teachers need to immerse themselves in self-compassion practice and teach from an embodied, compassionate presence. Fulfilling the formal prerequisites for teacher training (such as personal meditation practice, silent retreat experience, teaching meditation to others, working with groups) is only the first step of the journey.

### **On Becoming a Guide in MSC**

Becoming a mountaineering guide is a good metaphor for MSC teacher training. Imagine you were a novice climber (a prospective MSC participant) and wanted to summit a particularly beautiful and challenging mountain. Your first step would probably be to find a trusted and skilled guide. What skills and competencies would you want from a guide to make the trip as safe, comfortable and enjoyable as possible?

The guide should accurately describe the nature of the climb and what it requires. MSC teachers should offer their MSC courses so that the expectations of participants match what’s being offered (it’s a workshop, not a retreat; it’s resource-building, not therapy; it’s primarily self-compassion training, not mindfulness-training). MSC teachers screen potential participants for how well they might fit in a particular course and whether the participants will be able to work together. After the program begins, if it appears that one or two people are struggling or slipping behind, teachers can specifically address the needs and concerns of those individuals.

A good mountaineering guide will properly prepare the climbers. MSC teachers advise their students to take responsibility for themselves throughout the course itself. They also ensure that support is available once the program has begun, for example, by having a co-teacher or a qualified mental health professional assisting in the program. Other ways of enhancing safety are requesting that participants continue to take any prescription medication, and if they are in psychotherapy, that they consult with their therapist prior to attending MSC.

A mountaineering guide will have the capacity to lead the group in a calm and steady manner through difficult terrain. MSC teachers need to “hold their seat” when participants experience personal distress and, for example, when emotional conflict is directed toward the teacher or the group. MSC teachers know their limits and seek outside support when needed (using emergency contact information, advising professional help). It is rare that MSC teachers need to access emergency or back-up procedures but knowing they are available gives everyone a sense of safety and comfort.

As the MSC course progresses, teachers are emotionally attuned to the needs of individual members as well as the group as a whole. Holding individual and group needs in mind, teachers can assess whether to move forward, when to take a break, and how to cover course material in the allotted time. Emotional attunement and time management are important domains of competence for MSC teachers.

Self-understanding is also necessary for MSC teachers in order to deal with the diverse personalities in the group and the changes they go through. Mindful self-compassion activates a sense of safeness associated with the mammalian caregiving system and, paradoxically, may also trigger feelings of unsafeness deriving from one’s early relational experience (“backdraft”). Most course participants go through this process, but teachers may do as well so they need to know their own vulnerabilities to guide others safely along the path.

A key aspect of teaching MSC is to teach from personal experience and embodied presence. This capacity inspires a sense of trust in the group. MSC teachers must be ready to be *teachers* whose main task is to understand the needs and struggles of other people and to help them along the way. Some of those who seek to take MSC Teacher Training may want to become MSC teachers primarily to deepen their own practice but MSC Teacher Training is really designed for those who seek to teach others. If you are in the former category, you might want to consider other venues for deepening your practice.

The best mountaineering guides are knowledgeable. It’s important for MSC teachers to have a solid understanding of the theory and practice of MSC, but such information alone is not enough to lead people on an inner, emotional journey through tricky terrain. Again, we need to be focused on the needs of our students and have some capacity to accompany and support them on the path.

Mountaineering guides understand the abilities and limitations of their group. While teaching MSC, maintaining a balanced emotional tone is important for effective teaching – balancing contact with positive and negative experience. Trying to keep the atmosphere too pleasant may lead to “sugar-coating” difficult emotions and focusing too much on emotional pain will overwhelm and demoralize course participants.

It requires courage and skill to invite participants to share difficult experiences that arise in their practice. Ultimately, these conversations are the most transformational as participants learn to meet seemingly impossible, old conflicts in a new way. If we seek and validate only positive experiences, we risk alienating members of the group who are already bumping up against important obstacles. The arising of challenges, resistances and even a sense of disillusionment as actually a clear indication that we

are teaching MSC, not that the teaching is failing! However, it's also important to know that we don't need to be continually oriented toward emotional pain. Light-hearted humor, casual stories, and cultivating simple connections between participants helps everyone to re-engage emotional pain later on.

At the end of the day, the choice to embark on the path to self-compassion belongs to the participant, and the pace, the challenges, and the fruits of practice are in the hands of the participant. MSC teachers commit themselves to be knowledgeable companions, inspiring, comforting, nourishing, and supporting each person along the way.

Prospective MSC teachers are encouraged to reflect on what you've just read, notice your reactions to the content of this essay, and determine your own readiness to teach MSC at this time. Teaching MSC is itself a beautiful journey, but a rather different one than practicing MSC for oneself. If you decide to take the next step, you will be asked to briefly share your reflections as part of the application process.

*With warmest wishes,  
The MSC Teacher Training Team*

### **Self-Reflection on the Journey of Becoming a Teacher of Mindful Self-Compassion**

The process of becoming a teacher of Mindful Self-Compassion is one like no other. It is a complex interplay of deep inner experience, education, experiential training and supported practice that blends to guide the teacher into the realm of competence. Needless to say, this is not a linear pathway by any means, and perhaps even referring to it as a path is problematic because of the linearity implied by that term. It is an exploration that begins within and radiates out into a range of domains and can be pursued in a number of ways, each potentially valid and useful if pursued with reflection, clear intention and a willingness to be flexible and open.

And in the end, it is indeed a journey. Like any journey that you may embark upon with a sense of purpose or desire, you must know clearly where you stand before striking out in search of something. It helps to have a map that describes the terrain, the interesting highlights and the dangerous territory, and guides you to the desired destination. And finally it helps to know the way in which you intend to travel and with what purpose.

This exercise is intended to prepare you, the novice teacher of MSC, in preparing for this journey and especially for your upcoming classes and the online consultation sessions. Just as the overall journey is not a linear one, this self-reflection practice can be returned to periodically to re-assess and make necessary course corrections.

*How to Engage in Reflective Self-Assessment:* Allow this exercise to be an honest but kind consideration of areas of comfort, confidence and competence, as well as of your “edges”. Exploring one’s edges requires courage. Like the ancient explorers who perused maps that had dire warnings scrawled upon their edges reading “Beyond There Be Dragons”, so too will you be invited to be intrepid in sailing out to uncharted and possibly uncomfortable places to know those areas where you may need to grow and develop as a teacher (and as a person). This exploratory work can be unusually fruitful when we are willing to do it with an open heart.

At the same time it is important to become familiar with your areas of strength to help create a solid base from which you can grow. Take the time to acknowledge and appreciate your good qualities, talents and areas of proficiency. You might even pause to feel some gratitude toward the people and circumstances that allowed you to grow in these ways, and to feel their supportive presence on your journey.

#### **Reflective Self-Assessment**

To promote and assess competence in MBI teaching Rebecca Crane and her colleagues (Crane, Eames et al. 2013) in the United Kingdom have developed the Mindfulness-Based Intervention Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI-TAC). Whilst the

MBI-TAC was originally developed to guide the development of trained teachers, it can be used to assess the developing competencies of teachers-in-training and the fidelity of teachers in research. The six general domains of competence included in the MBI-TAC, outlined below, capture virtually all aspects of teaching MBI's in an elegant and interrelated way. The MBI-TAC describes each domain and behaviorally defines levels of teaching competence (ranging from "Incompetent" to "Advanced") in each domain. Taking the time to take stock of where one stands on these domains can be a fruitful starting point as you embark on your journey of developing as a teacher. The domains of the MBI-TAC (modified for specific application to MSC) are incorporated below in several of the self-reflection steps.

### **Beginning the Reflection**

Set aside a single block of time of at least an hour. Find a quiet comfortable location where you can feel at ease to reflect and write. Assembling a journal or pad, pen and a hot or cold drink can create a friendly atmosphere. Take a moment to just sit in silence with this important gift that you have just given yourself: time, space and materials to drop the automaticity and unrelenting forward movement of our busy lives to simply be with yourself in a kind and gentle way. This is no small feat to begin with, and exactly the kind of thing that you seek to encourage in the students who attend your programs. Savor and get to know this place. It will be your platform for practice and contemplation. Take your time and allow the prompts to linger and roll around in your mind and heart before responding, trusting your first responses but also making room for what may be below or behind a response that might be deeper and closer to the truth for you at this time. Considering the fact that you are contemplating a long-term commitment to teaching MSC, a couple hours is a small investment that could pay off in many ways over the course of many years, so making the effort to find an uninterrupted block of time is definitely worth the effort.

### **Contemplative Prompt Number One: Why Am I Here?**

The core of self-compassion training is the refinement of intention: giving ourselves compassion not to feel better but because we feel bad, befriending the person we are already. As novice teachers we need to be clear about our intention to learn to teach self-compassion. *Why are you here?* Take some time to consider why you are sitting here, reading these words and contemplating what it might take to become a teacher of MSC. What experiences have you had, what calling do you hear, what moves you to change what you do to include the teaching of MSC?

Remember that all "answers" are valid and worthy of consideration. Set aside any judgments you may form knowing that our inner critic usually does not help us thrive despite its best intentions. Allow yourself to write all thoughts down without censoring them and see where it leads you.

- Perhaps the idea of teaching MSC appeared to be a passing whim without particular substance?
- Perhaps you deeply desire to relieve your own suffering through teaching others?

- Perhaps you have a sense of being in a rut or dissatisfied with life as it is, you may want to listen more deeply to your desires and wishes and break free of old habits and limiting fears?
- Perhaps you wish to deeply want to relieve others' suffering?
- Perhaps you notice the wish to prove yourself to others?
- Perhaps you seek to earn a living partially through teaching MSC?
- Perhaps you want to train in MSC to stay competitive?
- Perhaps you notice the wish to "convert" others?
- Perhaps you notice the wish to maintain your own compassion practice by teaching it?

Let it be a whole list of causes and conditions that have led you here. Let go of it needing to be coherent or nicely wrapped in a single phrase or conclusion, but be open to hearing what rings true to you. Give yourself permission to write on this topic for as long as you need to. Let long pauses be what inspires you to go deeper, rather than a sign that you should stop. Don't worry. You'll know when you have done enough.

### **Contemplative Prompt Number Two: Where Is Here?**

Unless one can locate oneself on the map, it is fruitless (and pointless) to set off in a particular direction. Take the time to sort out where you stand because the implications, in terms of what's next, can be substantial. Consider your life as it is right now and ask yourself the following questions:

- Where do you stand in your professional life and development?
- Where do you stand in your personal life and development?
- What professional skills do you "bring to the table" that help you become a MSC teacher?
- What personal skills do you "bring to the table" that help you become a MSC teacher?
- What aspects of teaching MSC do you feel sure and confident about, what aspects do you feel you lack, which do you desire to acquire?
- How motivated and committed are you to acquiring these skills?
- What commitments would it entail (time, finances, professional changes, facing feelings of incompetence?)
- What are you ready for to change and what needs to wait?

Knowing and acknowledging where you are and how ready you are to change allows you to choose a pace and direction that suits you rather than forcing yourself into a process that does not align with where you are.

- What barriers do you perceive in moving towards teaching proficiency? Are these true barriers? How might self-compassion help you overcome those barriers? What do you need to overcome those barriers?

For example, if your confidence is wavering and you find your self-talk to be somewhat critical or doubtful, can you thank your inner critic for its attempts to keep you safe and explore the possibility that this is just natural nervousness at embarking on a new

journey? Is there some way that your doubts actually represent opportunities for you to practice self-compassion and to bring that embodiment directly into the classroom because everyone there has struggled with something similar in their lives? It might also be fruitful to consider who will be there to support you in the MSC classroom. Do you have a co-teacher? An assistant? A mental health backup? If you don't have help, could you find someone to fill one of these roles? What would that provide you? If you do have a co-teacher or assistant, what is your felt sense of that relationship and what needs attention to assure a comfortable and fruitful collaboration?

Once you have written and run out of things to write, take the time consider what you have written. Perhaps you would find it worthwhile to now take this series of observations and reconfigure them into a single paragraph that describes where you are. Or maybe just reading through them and reflecting on them is enough.

### **Contemplative Prompt Number Three: How Do You Relate to Others?**

*(MBI-TAC Domain of Relational Skills)*

Perhaps obviously, we bring ourselves into the MSC classroom, so that who we are in relation to others (in our lives, in our work and in the classroom) is crucial to consider. As Crane and her colleagues note about teaching MBI's of all sorts, "(it) is highly relational – mindfulness practice engages us in a process of developing a new relationship both with ourselves and our experience." The way in which we as teachers relate to participants (and the teaching process) is, in fact, no different, than how we are teaching participants to be with themselves.

Compassion is an interpersonal experience, and has been defined as one mind being sensitive to the suffering in another sentient being with the wish to alleviate this suffering. In contrast, I can be mindful of the experience of eating an apple but I cannot feel compassion towards the apple (neither is the apple capable of feeling compassion towards me nor can I teach the apple to relate more compassionately to its pain of being eaten by me ☺). Feeling compassion requires having a sentient being as an object with at least the basic capacity to feel, such as an animal or a human being. Our sense of self is constructed through interpersonal interactions in early life and is therefore fundamentally interpersonal. How others relate to us shapes the way we relate to others – including how we relate to ourselves. As MSC teachers our embodiment of self-compassion and compassion to others is the foundation for group members to learn to relate compassionately to each other and to themselves.

Take some time to contemplate what your interpersonal style might be in your daily life. How do the people who know you, describe you? Are you seen as gentle, warm and encouraging? Are you gregarious and outgoing (an extrovert), or are you more interpersonally cautious and reserved (an introvert)? Do you tend to like to make suggestions or give advice to friends, or do you tend to be the one who is a "shoulder to cry on" and someone who is known as a good listener?

In your professional endeavors do you incline toward the role of teacher, or are you more egalitarian and a consensus-builder? Are you, in general, a leader or a follower? Since you are likely to be co-teaching MSC, it's worth considering whether you

are a team player or more of an individualist. Would your colleagues be more likely to say that they respect you or like you? Again, all responses are equally valid and none would preclude you from being a teacher of MSC if you can recognize your own patterns and tendencies and work with them mindfully. Becoming a teacher of self-compassion requires a deep, compassionate awareness of oneself and one's tendencies so that they can be recognized and worked with compassionately in the context of the classroom.

It might be helpful to consider your relational style relative to the MSC teacher or teachers you had. If you found them to be effective, what made them effective in your mind and how similar or different are you from them? How did you feel in their presence?

Given what you may know of how self-compassion is taught, what will likely be your "edges" in teaching? Maybe think about other situations where you may have facilitated groups and what sorts of challenges and difficulties arose. Are there particular types of situations or certain types of people who "hook" you and lead you astray? What happens when things don't go as you would prefer? Do you tend toward becoming nervous, self-conscious, defensive or authoritative? Do you have a tendency to rely on intellect and ideas when you are caught off guard or are feeling uncertain? Are you an emotionally expressive person who might be swept up in a story of suffering or struggle? Are you particularly enthusiastic to the point of potentially being impatient for group members to "get it" in short order? These and other "edges" are important to note and speak to the ongoing "work" of becoming a teacher and working with our habitual patterns.

Take the time to reflect on what you have written. Can you develop a "felt sense" of what is assembled there? Notice what reactions you might have to reading what you have written, and if what comes up is challenging, can you bring kindness to that? Perhaps it would be worthwhile at some point to seek out the perspective of others, not because others will be more "right" than you, but to see how you come across relative to how you see yourself. Sometimes resolving the apparent discrepancies in how we see ourselves and how others see us can yield powerful and important insights.

### **Contemplative Prompt Number Four: How Do You Work With Groups?**

*(MBI-TAC Domain of Holding the Group Learning Environment)*

Perhaps a subset of how we show up interpersonally in general is how we show up and function in groups. Some of us retain the same patterns and tendencies when we are in a gathering of other people, and some of us seem to transform in interesting and unexpected ways.

The contemplation here begins with a consideration of what comes up for you when you envision being the teacher of a group. Speaking in public is the most widespread fear that people seem to share, even more than the fear of death. This finding led comedian Jerry Seinfeld to remark that "for most people, if they are at a funeral, they would rather be *in* the casket than giving the eulogy!" What emotions arise

when you picture yourself leading and teaching an MSC group? Are you excited? Curious? Anxious? What does the prospect of teaching a group conjure up for you?

Then, thinking back to groups which you have led as a mindfulness teacher or as mental health professional in clinical settings, what has been your typical role? Looking back on these experiences, you will likely identify a recurring theme to your role and seeing if you can acknowledge that theme (and how it manifests in you) can be highly beneficial.

Looking specifically at the qualities of a good MSC teacher, it is worthwhile to think of some specific features or skills that are needed, both from a self-compassion perspective and those identified by Crane et al for MBI's more generally. These include the ability to practice self-compassion for your own self when you are aware of a struggle or suffering; to maintain the safe and inviting "learning container" of the classroom; a knowledge and ability to work with the development of the group over time; a facility with connecting the individual experience to the universal learning that takes place; and a leadership style that holds the group warmly but allows for individual experience.

Taking these qualities as a starting place, what is your experience with creating a safe, supportive environment for groups? What do you know about how groups form and grow over time? Are you able to "hear between the lines" when someone in a group expresses herself and recognize the thread of the larger topic that is embedded within it? Do you find that when you are in a position of responsibility in a group that you are able to facilitate action and progress from the group, or do you struggle? What do you do when under stress?

There are talented teachers of MSC with all manner of ways of being in a group, so there is no particular requirement for one to be a certain way, except to say that the intention of the leader must be clear and compassionate and reflective of the practice of self-compassion itself. The list above is extensive, and it may seem overwhelming if taken as a whole, but instead of focusing on where you may still have things to learn, ask yourself an even more important question: "When I am in a group, where do I shine?" Feel some gratitude and appreciation for this quality that you bring to a group and allow yourself to begin to see how this shining quality might help you develop in the areas where you need more work.

Figure out where you shine, and where your shadows are around being in groups. Take the time to embrace all of it and consider what's next for you in this arena.

### **Contemplative Prompt Number Five: How Do You Embody the Practice of Mindfulness and Self-Compassion?**

*(MBI-TAC Domain of Embodiment of Self-Compassion)*

How does your personal practice of mindfulness and self-compassion actually manifest while teaching? In other words, does your very being and presence as a teacher actually reflect the fruits of your personal practice of self-compassion and mindfulness? That is, do we actually *embody* these qualities that we hope our students

will develop? When people are in our presence, do they experience us as a “loving, connected presence”?

Embodiment should not be confused with understanding what mindfulness or self-compassion is or even “modeling” these qualities. One can understand self-compassion from an intellectual standpoint, and speak about it with great authority and ease, but that is not teaching self-compassion, it is teaching *about* self-compassion. Similarly, one can *act* self-compassionately to show others “how to do it” but without the authenticity of hours and hours of personal practice, this modeling comes across as hollow and insincere. You wouldn’t take swimming lessons from someone who was well read on swimming, but would flail around and sink to the bottom of the pool like a stone if they fell in!

It can be fruitful to consider not how you carry yourself most of the time, although that is one form of embodiment, but how you deal with the unexpected, the difficult and the overwhelming. Not just what your emotional reaction to these situations might be, but how you relate to those feelings and how you work with them.

For example, to teach MSC you have to know shame. You have to recognize it in yourself and in others and be able to relate to it with compassion when it arises in yourself and others. It’s perfectly reasonable to feel shame when confronted with a situation that pulls for shame, but the true test of embodiment is how we maintain our equanimity or how we work compassionately with that shame when it arises. Can we maintain a larger perspective or do we get overcome by the feeling? Can we actually name the feeling of shame arising or locate an associated sensation in the body and meet that arising with kindness, or do we find ourselves resisting and distracting away from the feelings?

A helpful metaphor would be that of a reservoir built to gather ground water and yield drinking water. The size (surface area) of the reservoir can be seen to reflect the breadth of training and experience in mindfulness and self-compassion a person may have, and the depth of that reservoir is a function of the depth of actual personal practice. A very broad but shallow reservoir can certainly seem to be effective, but without the depth all the muddy and unclean water that flows into it (the difficult and challenging emotions that may arise) just flows right on out again at the dam (in the form of unreflective, potentially harmful and reflexive emotional expression). A very deep and long self-compassion and mindfulness practice might create a very deep reservoir, but without the sheer “acreage” of surface area, it will miss a great deal of what is present because of the very narrowness of its existence. Only a broad and deep reservoir, cultivated through deep mindfulness practice and broad study and understanding, can truly comprise a mindful presence by the teacher.

So perhaps you can ask yourself: how broad is your understanding and experience with self-compassion and mindfulness (the size of your reservoir) and how deep is your own personal practice of them (the depth of your reservoir). As MSC teachers, we are all “reservoirs under construction” in many ways, and we each have our own strengths and areas for development, but first we need to know the nature of our own personal reservoir so we know what work is left to build an effective one.

A truly embodied teacher of MSC is someone who can remain acutely emotionally attuned to the arising of emotions (in himself/herself as well as in group participants) moment by moment, and maintain the warmth and equanimity required to meet that arising with an embodied presence that reflects exactly how we would like our participants to meet their own experiences: with kindness, gentleness and self-compassion. Thus the embodied teacher needs to have sufficient breadth to hold all that arises, and sufficient depth to bring compassion to the experience of difficult and messy emotions, so that they settle to the bottom and allow clarity and ease to flow through.

Can you describe the nature of your own personal reservoir for the purposes of self-reflection and assessment? What are the features that stand out, both positive and negative, that make your reservoir truly your own? What do you aspire to in regard to building your own reservoir of embodiment? How do you see yourself working compassionately on these areas in the course of the coming weeks and months?

### **Contemplative Prompt Number Six: How Do You Guide Practice?**

*(MBI-TAC Domain of Guiding MSC Practices)*

The tone, form, pacing and content are all crucial aspects of meditation guidance, but for now, what comes up when you contemplate leading a meditation? Excitement? Anxiety? Trepidation? Notice what arises and make a mental note. This feeling may be your companion on the path of teaching and it's best that you get to know your traveling companions early if you are embarking on a long journey!

If, on the other hand, you have guided meditation in the past, it is worthwhile taking the time to carefully consider this prompt. If you are doing this currently, you might record a snippet of your guidance next time (e.g. voice recorder on Smartphone). Listen to it carefully and reflectively at another time when you can really HEAR what you have to say, how you say it and what your reaction may be. Ask yourself how the guidance makes you feel, what you find yourself lingering over (both positive and negative) and what seems to flow smoothly. Do you find your guidance to be clear, precise and accurate in its content? Perhaps you could play the recording for a trusted friend or colleague and hear what their reaction may be. Not an evaluation of your guidance, but their impressions of how it feels to be led by you or how your voice, tone and pacing come across.

This may seem like a trivial consideration in the overall scheme of things, but a tremendous amount of embodiment is expressed in the teacher's guidance of practice and the process of becoming a teacher is often a journey toward finding one's own voice, letting go of trying to sound like some admired teacher or the "ideal meditation teacher" and instead letting the words and tone flow from one's own practice that proceeds in parallel with the practice of those we are guiding. Teachers of MBI's should be teaching out of their own practice meaning that, to whatever extent is possible, we are engaged in *doing* the practice that we are guiding. Thus the instructions, the gentle cautions, the fleeting observations that may be a part of the words spoken by the teacher are actually arising in the teacher's experience *of* the practice they are doing. Consequently a noise in the hallway is an opportunity for the teacher to notice how they

receive that noise and perhaps provide guidance like “noticing the arising of sound in the environment and feeling it reverberate through your body and mind, and notice that reverberation fading over time . . . “ If the teacher notices boredom arising, it is likely that some participants will be feeling the same and kindly noting the possibility of boredom in the guidance can be tremendously helpful as a result.

The guidance of practice is a blend of learning the basics and the language, and tapping into one’s own practice and experience to offer guidance that supports the teaching and learning of self-compassion and mindfulness. This delicate balance and blending of knowledge, skill, oral expression and practice develops over time and most of the steps on the path toward competence feed in to one’s ability to guide practice. Knowing where we stand and making a record of it (with recording) can be a powerful means of assessing where we are and providing a benchmark to use as we progress on the path that can help us see our development over time as teachers.

Once you have reflected on this aspect of yourself as a future MSC teacher, make some notes to yourself about what you appreciate about your guidance and also where you see room for improvement. Being willing to see ourselves as a constant work in progress and fully human with all the flaws and foibles that we possess, allows us to embrace where we are and who we are at the moment, and truly grow as teachers.

### **Contemplative Prompt Number Seven: What is your familiarity and facility with the content and process of the MSC curriculum?**

*(MBI-TAC Domain of Coverage, Pacing and Organization of Session Curricula)*

At its most basic level, the prompt urges you to consider whether you know the various parts, exercises, practices and assignments included in MSC. This knowledge typically begins from having taken the course itself and taken Teacher Training.

But, as you have probably already realized, the content is really only the beginning. MSC has a structure that has been very carefully assembled with very clear intentions and meticulous attention to placement of components and themes to support those intentions. Add in the less predictable aspect of any MBI, the participants themselves, who will arrive and participate with their own particular needs, concerns and issues, and orchestrating a coherent and effective class session can begin to take on aspects of a stage production!

This meeting of intention, course content, the fluctuating needs of the group and the person of the teacher can often be the “juiciest” part of teaching and learning mindfulness in this context, but also obviously requires a lot from us as teachers. It is at this crossroads that the novice may begin to see the contributions of the various aspects of becoming a teacher, including personal practice, knowledge of the material, formal training, guidance and supervision, and just plain experience teaching the program. All of this can be developed and deepened over time, so again this is not intended to intimidate you, but to map the terrain so you develop an appreciation of how you fit into it and what you will need to seek out and develop on this journey, especially in consultation sessions.

For this particular aspect of self-reflection on the path to teaching, it is good to perhaps note what formal education and training you have had in the field and about teaching in general. What experience have you had in teaching and guiding others into new and unfamiliar territory in any domain? Whether you've been a tour guide, a professor, a human resources professional or a psychotherapist, you have developed some of the roots of this aspect of teaching MSC and it's good to reflect on this as your base from which to grow.

And then it's worth considering "the places that scare you" (also the name of a wonderful book by Pema Chodron). In this case it may simply be the areas of the MSC material with which you are least comfortable, but it might also be a reflection on what aspects of teaching in general might foster a bit of unease when you have been put in that position. Knowing that teaching mindfulness and self-compassion is often quite different from teaching traditionally didactic subjects, you may actually come to discover that things you never liked about teaching in other settings, set you up to be an amazing teacher in the mindfulness realm. For example if you have felt uncomfortable with the authoritative role of teacher in which you present materials to the subservient students who should listen carefully and take in the material (picture here a mother bird at the nest, dropping pre-chewed worm into eager open mouths), you will likely thrive teaching MSC! None of that is called for in the MSC classroom. So for now, get to know yourself as a teacher and what your edges are, both in regard to this particular material and teaching in general.

You might also consider those who have taught *you* in some way. Think about the best teachers you have had throughout your life and maybe make note of the qualities that made them so good. And then consider any teachers of mindfulness or compassion that you have encountered and what has really stood out for you, both in terms of what you really liked and admired, but also what didn't work well for you (we are all works in progress after all!). You might also take note of what was curious or unusual about how that person taught, because you may have tapped into some of the key aspects of teaching mindfulness that differ from most other forms of teaching.

And finally reflect on how and when and where you *really* learned self-compassion itself. Not when you learned *about* self-compassion, but when you learned the thing itself. Was there a moment or an experience, or perhaps a series of them, when you feel you really, truly experienced what self-compassion is and something of its profound potential to heal, change and transform? How did you come to that place or those places, and who around you facilitated that introduction? It may have been someone you wouldn't have considered a teacher per se, but nonetheless somehow their way of being themselves facilitated your deep learning process. While you will likely never re-create that exact sort of situation for someone else, there is something to be gained from considering the entire experience.

Who have been your teachers and what have they taught you about teaching?

**Contemplative Prompt Number Eight: What is your familiarity and facility with conveying course themes through the two primary modes of teaching in MSC: mindful interactive inquiry and didactic teaching?**

*(MBI-TAC Domain of Conveying Course Themes Through Interactive Inquiry and Didactic Teaching)*

There are two primary ways in which MSC participants come to gain something from their participation. Through learning *about* self-compassion and from learning self-compassion *itself*. The “about” portion is conveyed through didactic presentation of material, discussions, readings, and exercises, and the ability of the teacher to be clear and comfortable with this process is very important. The learning of mindfulness and self-compassion itself happens, of course, primarily through the formal practice of it, but often the most crucial and powerful moments of learning arise in the process of inquiry in the MSC classroom. The means of conducting or practicing inquiry requires a certain approach to facilitation of experiential learning that is absolutely crucial to effective teaching in MSC.

As you know, mindful inquiry is the process that unfolds between teacher and student in the MSC classroom following a practice or exercise. The teacher is embodying the exact qualities that the program is intending to foster in the participant, including curiosity, willingness, patience and compassion. Thus when a teacher asks the open-ended question at the conclusion of a practice, "What did you notice?" the participants are encouraged to report on exactly that: what they noticed. That response may contain observations of unfolding experience but in MSC we are listening deeply for signs of suffering and gently inquiring into whether (or how) the person was able to bring self-compassion to that experience, and if not, if it might be possible to do so right there in the moment of inquiry.

There is obviously a great deal more to mindful inquiry, but for the purposes of determining where we stand in regard to teaching through this means, it becomes important to consider how we prefer to teach and, especially, how much *trust* we feel we can place in the twin processes of experiential learning and didactic education, and how comfortable we are in navigating and balancing these two aspects of MBI teaching.

So a logical next question is "How do you prefer to teach?" When put in the position of conveying something new to another person, do you lean toward explaining or demonstrating? Are you equally comfortable with both ways of teaching, or do you tend to default toward one or the other? As has been the case with other reflective questions thus far, consider the situations where you feel tested, stressed or uncertain. To borrow a question from Saki Santorelli, "What do you do when you don't know what to do?" Consider your tendencies, your comfort zones, and your "edges" when it comes to being in the teaching role.

Often, when we are invited to teach something to someone else, our beliefs and convictions toward the material itself are put to the test and our insecurities or uncertainties manifest in the form and flow of our teaching. So then the fundamental question emerges here as to how deeply connected and resonant do you feel with the practice of self-compassion for yourself? How do you know, really *know*, self-compassion within yourself and how confident are you in your ability to teach it to

others? Where might you be tested or stretched in an MSC classroom? Again, you don't need to feel you have "mastered" self-compassion by any means (in fact if you think you have, you're already in trouble!) but knowing your growing edges will guide your journey toward competence and be a major factor in your determination of when you begin to feel ready to teach.

Teaching self-compassion, as noted above, involves both the teaching of it and the teaching about it, and it's worth considering where you stand on each of these modes. Do you feel adequately educated about self-compassion, the specifics of MSC and how those specifics are conveyed in exercises, didactic material and discussion? What do you feel is lacking in your knowledge base and your ability to convey it clearly, comfortably and convincingly? How comfortable are you with allowing an overarching theme to guide you in your teaching, to inform how you respond to questions or observations, and to be flexible with how that theme ends up being conveyed in any given classroom situation?

At the same time, how confident are you in your ability to facilitate MSC inquiry: to draw out the experience of participants in an open-ended and encouraging fashion, to hone in on direct unfolding of experience, to embody mindfulness and self-compassion in that encounter and provide a model for self-compassion practice by the way in which you engage with the participant? One way to ask this question is to consider another one: How much do you trust the process of inquiry? What do you know about this process of inquiry and how comfortable are you engaging in it?

### **Concluding Contemplative Prompt: Why am I here?**

And so we come full circle to the question that we started with. But perhaps now something has changed or shifted in some way in regards to the question "Why am I here?" Consider what you have learned or discovered in this process of reflection and consideration. Have you surprised yourself in some way? Was something uncovered that wasn't immediately obvious when you embarked on this journey of reflection?

Perhaps it is time to return to the Well Exercise from MSC and consider the question "Why am I here?" and then follow the metaphor of dropping a stone into a deep well, dropping that question into the well of your attention and see, as it drops deeper and deeper into your heart, if there might be something underneath the original answer. And as the question drops still deeper, is there an answer even deeper than *that* answer to the question "Why am I really *really* here?" See what bubbles up spontaneously for you. What is that has endured through this process, and what has evolved, changed or simply dropped away? What are you left with that feels genuine, important or seminal for you?

Write it down and get to know why you are really, really here. Maybe even consider coming back to this word, or phrase or paragraph periodically and see if gives you a sense of purpose, direction or focus for your progression toward becoming an MSC teacher. Let it be like a talisman that reminds you of your intention in doing this work, making it easily accessible and visible (on the refrigerator door or on a scrap of

paper inside your MSC Teacher Guide) and seeing if it helps you get re-oriented when you feel you've lost your way or gotten off track in some way.

### **What else you might do with what you've done, and where to go next**

As you've traversed this territory of teaching MBI's, you have probably identified some areas of real strength and passion for yourself. Things that bring you confidence and commitment to continuing on the journey. At the same time, you have probably identified some "edges" or gaps that will need filling or growing if you are to be effective at teaching mindfulness in whatever form you seek to teach it in. On balance, how do you feel about what you've found? As has been true throughout this exploration, it's not about having to achieve a certain level of expertise at this point, but to know what you have to work with. Perhaps it would be helpful to go back to what you have written and see if you can start to put together two lists: one of the areas of strength and confidence that you have identified and one of the areas that seem to need attention, growth, education or experience. Within the latter list, what seems to need the most work? Is there anything in the former list that could help you with the latter? Can you find ways to leverage your strengths to address your weaknesses? When you put it all together, is there a sense of direction or purpose that guides you toward your next steps in becoming a teacher of MSC

There is no one way to engage in this process of weighing the different areas of expertise and competence, but seeing them as integrated parts of a larger whole may provide some clues about what your pathway forward may be.

Finally, with all this mind, consider how you might best make use of your first MSC course and especially the weekly group video consultation sessions. What are you willing to share about your own process of self-reflection and what it revealed to you, that will truly facilitate your growth into being a teacher of MSC?

### **A Compassionate and Careful Reflection on Embodiment While Teaching MSC**

The teacher's embodiment of compassion by way of facilitating compassionate interactions between teacher and students and maintaining a safe, caring and accepting group atmosphere make up the core skills of an MSC teacher. The teacher's compassionate presence and relational style arise out of a synergy of different micro-skills, which are introduced below for your reflection and self-assessment. You will see that these micro-skills overlap as they are all required for compassion to arise. For instance, a lack of safety cannot be compensated for by an outstanding ability in perspective-taking; no matter how strong one's motivation is to care and to alleviate other's suffering, one can only help if we can tolerate the other's distress.

We have provided prompts to help you reflect on where you are in relation to these skills. The reflection will likely be different whether you are reflecting on your recent experience of teaching your very first 8-week MSC course, or looking back at over several 8-week courses as you prepare to pursue certification in teaching MSC.

#### **Compassion is relational**

Compassion is an interpersonal experience, and has been defined as one mind being sensitive to the suffering in another sentient being with the wish to alleviate this suffering. In contrast, I can be mindful of the experience of eating an apple but I cannot feel compassion towards the apple (neither is the apple capable of feeling compassion towards me nor can I teach the apple to relate more compassionately to its pain of being eaten by me ☺). Feeling compassion requires having a sentient being as an object with at least the basic capacity to feel, such as an animal or a human being. Our sense of self is constructed through interpersonal interactions in early life and is therefore fundamentally interpersonal. How others relate to us shapes the way we relate to others – including how we relate to ourselves. As MSC teachers our embodiment of self-compassion and compassion to others is the foundation for group members to learn to relate compassionately to each other and to themselves.

The learning of self-compassion is initiated by our embodiment and modelling of it. The directions of flow of compassion in a MSC class can be mapped in the following way: 1. Within the teacher; 2. Between co-teachers; 3. From teacher to group and to individual students; 4. Between group members; 5. Within the student

In an MSC teaching context we need compassion to flow in the following different directions to facilitate the development of self-compassion within our students.

#### *1. Teacher to Teacher (Self-to Self)*

Could you give yourself compassion as a teacher for any difficulties you were experiencing at the time in your life when you were teaching a course, perhaps when you found yourself listening to a painful experience a student was sharing?

If not, what would you have needed/do you need?

### *2. Teacher-to-Co-teacher (Self-to-Other; Other-to-Self)*

Did you feel sufficiently respected and supported by your co-teacher and did you feel able to respect and support your co-teacher? If not, what was getting in the way from your perspective? What would you have needed? (You might want to consult your co-teacher to get his or her view on this.)

### *3. Teacher to Student and to Group (Self- to- Other)*

Did you feel sufficiently held by your self-compassion practice to tune into the individual students' and the group's needs and to meet their needs in a loving yet light way?

If not, what was getting in the way of compassion flowing between you and the group, or you and individual students?

### *4. Group to Student (Other to Other)*

Could you perceive a sense of mutual care and concern in the overall group and in the interactions between students?

If not, what was getting in the way of compassion flowing between the students?

### *5. Student to Student (Self-to-Self)*

Could individual students recognise they were suffering and could they eventually meet their experience with mindfulness, common humanity and kindness? If yes, what were examples?

If not, what was getting in the way of self-compassion flowing within individual students?

The teacher's key task is to create a safe and sensitive interpersonal environment. Through conveying warmth, openness and patience, teachers create a relaxed atmosphere of playfulness, collaboration and mutual acceptance. Teachers require the ability to hold the safe space by maintaining the agreed structure, setting boundaries and allowing sufficient opportunity for sharing and exploration.

## **Motivated to care and to become fully human**

Teaching self-compassion starts with a motivation to care for ourselves and for others, which arises out of the good will of loving kindness. Put more simply, our motivation as MSC teachers towards our students is to "Lov'em up!" as Christopher Germer puts it. Evolutionary psychologists have proposed that our interactions with each other (*interpersonal*), including with ourselves (*intrapersonal*) follow fundamental social motivations, known as social mentalities. For instance, an interaction can be

guided by our wish to give or receive care; or by our wish to dominate and subordinate another; or by our wish to compete with another; or by our wish to engage sexually or by our wish to co-operate with each other for mutual benefit. Needless to say, we primarily recruit our care-giving and care-receiving mentality when teaching self-compassion as opposed to those for dominance-subordination, competition, sexuality or co-operation.

Experiencing the care-giving/receiving mentality involves “feeling felt” plus “receiving care/feeling cared for” or “giving care/feeling caring towards others”. In inquiry we resonate empathically so that the student “feels felt” plus we let the student feel cared for and guide him or her to care for him or herself. When listening compassionately to each other, students might extend feelings of caring for another. In fact, a skilled MSC teacher will support the unfolding of the group process in such a way that the group becomes a lived example of a caring and compassionate mind. Many MSC participants comment on how much they appreciated the atmosphere of good will, warmth, support and acceptance in their group. This is the result of teacher and students all interacting and resonating from their caring and compassionate minds to co-create a group compassionate mind, which often feels like something bigger than the sum of its parts.

Teaching self-compassion requires our good will and caring mentalities to be “online”. However it is perfectly human to not feel good will for all students at all times! Certain people can push our buttons and we push theirs without us knowing. This model might help to be aware of other social mentalities to assess our own motivation and interactions between us and students, and amongst students, and to help us find ways to return to a caring mentality when we struggle to have good will. Our task as teachers is to note that our inner attitude has shifted, to understand why, to relate compassionately to our resistance and to the students’ suffering instead of shaming us or the student and to use whatever support we need to return to good will as best as we can.

## **A Reflection**

- What wish is your teaching of MSC driven by? (consider your response to the Well Meditation from MSC)
- Think about a specific group: How did you feel towards this group in general and towards specific students?
- Think about specific difficult interactions/situations:
  - What happened?
  - What were your words or actions driven by?
  - What were the words or actions of the student driven by?
  - Could the difficult interaction/situation be explained by a mismatch between the motivation of the student and you? E.g. the student wanted to subordinate/to dominate/to compete/to flirt/to co-operate and the teacher wanted to give care or vice versa?
  - Why did you not feel caring towards a student?
  - What did you need to re-enter into a caring mentality/good will with this student? (e.g. acknowledge and feel shame in you; co-teacher to take

over; to take a self-compassion break; recognize a feeling (of shame) or unmet need behind student's sharing and have compassion for that feeling/need; speak to the student one-on-one to understand; contain the student in a firm and kind way; etc.).

- Could you give that to yourself? If not, why not?
- What would have helped the student at that moment?

Good will combined with the motivation to care is the starting point of teaching self-compassion. However, for self-compassion to manifest fully in our students, we need to teach our students how to relate to one's pain and imperfections with great kindness. Nothing less than accepting ourselves and others unconditionally just as we are. It surely is a tall order to accept our students let alone ourselves as new teachers as work in progress! Modelling being fully human as a teacher including being able to handle shame with kindness can be a catalyst for group members to show common humanity around being a "compassionate mess" – being fully human yet deeply committed to care and to do the best we can every day. These moments are typically followed by palpable relief and a sudden increase in humour and laughter in the group!

### **A Reflection**

- Consider to what extent you embodied being a "compassionate mess" during your last teaching experience? Write down particular incidents/moments during your last teaching experience.
- To what extent were interactions between the students and you/amongst the students marked by the idea to drop the fight and allow ourselves to be fully human? Write down specific instances during your last teaching experience.
- If you don't find any and you struggle to relate to "compassionate mess" experiences, then see what other motivations might have been present when teaching? Were you striving to be perfect? Were you afraid of being shamed or looked down upon? What would you need to feel safe enough to be more authentic as a teacher?

### **Safety: the ground for compassion**

In order to practice self-compassion, our students need to feel safe enough to go to the places they fear and which they typically avoid such as painful and often shameful experiences. Creating safety is a prerequisite for developing the skill of self-compassion and for picking up the courage to approach those emotions. If we feel unsafe, our mind is automatically oriented towards establishing safety through fight-flight-freeze strategies and our hearts will close down. The minds of new teachers work just the same! Trust in ourselves and in others is what usually calms us so that we can feel safe again to open up.

Establishing interpersonal safety in MSC involves setting up and implementing guiding principles, containing any lack of safety, giving opportunity for students to get to know each other (small group sharing) and by developing trusting relationships with our co-teacher and each student – often through informal conversations during breaks.

Establishing intrapersonal safety in MSC starts with the teacher making the necessary external and internal adjustments to feel safe within him or herself and for the teacher to protect the “safe container” of the group for students to engage with difficult emotions at their own pace. For some students the “safe container” needs to be extended by naming a psychotherapist or other helping professional, which they agree to contact in addition to the MSC teacher.

The co-teacher relationship serves a critical function in terms of establishing and maintaining safety and modelling compassionate relating between co-teachers. Safety is maintained by the co-teacher helping with monitoring and supporting distressed individuals during and after sessions. Compassion practices activate our attachment system and it is common for backdraft in the form of blocked grief or other difficult emotions to arise. Individual attention and support is critical to help the student to refocus on the feeling of safeness, kindness and wisdom, from which they are able to contain the affect. The relationship between co-teachers can act as a model for compassionate relating. It should be marked by mutual regard, appreciation and warmth. Interactions between teachers also make transparent their caring intentions towards members, which fosters safety by instilling a sense of existing positively in the mind of both teachers.

### **A Reflection**

- Think about a specific group:
- *Teacher- to- Teacher:* How did you create safety within yourself? Did you feel threatened at all? If yes, by what and how did you re-establish safety within yourself?
- *Teacher – to –Co-teacher:* How did you create safety between you? Did you ever feel threatened by something your co-teacher said or did or failed to say or do in your mind? If yes, how did you re-establish safety between the teachers?
- *Teacher – to - Group:* How did you create safety for the group? Did anyone or anything threaten this group safety? If yes, what did you and/or the group do to re-establish safety?
- *Teacher – to – Student:* How did you create safety for individual students? Did any individual student feel threatened at any time? If yes, by what and what did you do to re-establish safety?
- Looking back now, over your recent teaching experiences, what do you want to do to increase safety for you and for students? What helps you to feel safer? (e.g. make sure you include only participants you feel comfortable supporting, emergency contact details at hand, permission to contact therapists upfront, learn more about shame and backdraft, have a mental health professional as co-teacher). What would have helped students to feel safer?

### **Empathic resonance**

As teachers we need to be sensitive to the feelings and needs of several parties simultaneously: ours, those of our co-teacher, individual participants and the group as

whole. No mean feat! Ideally we work towards balancing those needs as best as we can. Our open hearts (and neural mirroring systems) help us to tune into and to resonate with others' empathically. This resonance provides us with vital information on how the other person might be feeling and what they might need. If we hold this empathic resonance with great kindness and equanimity, it cannot burn us out. However, on some days we might react differently to our participants: 1) our hearts might be closed and we might fail to tune into a participant and seem indifferent; 2) when we experience a lot of stress and neglect ourselves, we might temporarily feel less able to hold other's pain in compassion and feel distressed and highly sensitive. Again, these are perfectly normal experiences and side effects of an open heart.

### **A Reflection**

- Think about a specific group:
- Were there moments that stand out as you feeling in tune with yourself, co-teacher, particular participant and the group? What helped you in these moments?
- Were there moments when you felt out of tune with yourself, your co-teacher, a particular participant or the group? What was happening for you in those moments? What would you have needed?

### **Distress tolerance**

The essence of self-compassion practice is knowing when we are suffering and holding our suffering in loving awareness. As MSC teachers we invite our students to touch the pain rather than avoid it or get caught up in it and relate to it in a radical new way – with kindness. One key skill needed to stay with and comfortably hold painful emotions – within yourself and those of others in the group simultaneously – is distress tolerance. It is not to be mistaken with “pulling yourself together” but relates to a calm strength that helps you to breathe with a painful experience rather than flinching - much like you might bear the pain of a medical procedure that is promising to cure you. Distress tolerance involves overcoming fears of what will happen to us when we allow ourselves to experience distress fully: some think distress will overwhelm us, damage us, stay around forever or make us act in uncontrollable and shameful ways.

Throughout MSC we implicitly invite students to test out these fear-based beliefs. From the first session on we repeatedly invite MSC students to engage with mildly to moderately difficult emotions as an occasion to activate their resources for self-compassion. The interpersonal learning of distress tolerance occurs through the teacher embodying a grounded, calm yet sensitive manner with which they hold their own emotions and those of students during inquiry and informal contacts.

The teacher's ability to hold student's distressing emotions is particularly important when students experience backdraft. Backdraft typically occurs unexpectedly and often the student is not just dealing with the distressing emotions but also with the their sudden onset and possible shame about experiencing these emotions. MSC teachers need to remain grounded, calm, containing and highly sensitive to the student's needs at those moments. MSC students learn distress tolerance

intrapersonally from practices such as Soften- Soothe-Allow. We explicitly invite MSC students to increase their tolerance of unpleasant feelings during Session 6 when we talk about tolerating the difficult emotion as sensations moving through our body once sufficient trust, safety and resources have been built.

### **A Reflection**

- Please consider the following questions in relation to your latest teaching experiences:
- How did you relate to any difficult emotions arising for you during the course/outside the course?
- Did you notice backdraft occurring in your last course? How did you deal with backdraft in your students?
- If you didn't notice any backdraft occurring, then why not? (*please explore questions in Equanimity section*)

### **Perspective-Taking**

Compassion involves an ability to discern and to differentiate, by holding multiple perspectives in mind at the same time. MSC teachers need to draw on their ability for perspective-taking when they touch a student's pain without getting overwhelmed by it. As MSC teachers we are also prone to suffer empathy pain and to feel overwhelmed by the other's pain. Feeling overwhelmed might lead to trying to fix, to feeling powerless and losing any perspective or to feeling irritated and distancing so that the connection to the student is lost. When we suffer from empathic pain with a student, it can help for us to breathe compassion in for ourselves and to remind ourselves that it is their pain and not ours. The latter involves differentiating "me" from "you" on a relative level and can help us re-engage with the other person. Perspective-taking also involves knowing that the student has multiple selves they can draw on. Whilst a frightened or hopeless self is manifesting now, the teacher holds the more helpful parts of the student in mind and guides the student to access his or her compassionate self.

### **A Reflection**

- What were your initial reactions when confronted with distress of in some of your students in your recent course?
- Did you notice a tendency towards fixing/feeling powerless/irritation or distancing in yourself? What (would have) helped you in those moments to reconnect with the student's pain in a loving yet light way?
- When did the skill of perspective-taking manifest in your latest teaching experiences? Can you give one or two examples?

### **Non-judgment/Equanimity**

MSC students are invited to let go of the wish that their pain would disappear and to surrender to their experience as it is. Letting go of preference for how things should be or how I should feel, and to receive all experiences – gain or loss – with an open

heart, is the practice of equanimity. Our natural tendency is to attach and hold on to pleasant experiences and to experience aversion to unpleasant experiences.

The notion that we let go of any outcomes is summarized in MSC in the following way: “We give ourselves compassion not to feel better, but because we feel bad.” How do we encourage equanimity in our students through interpersonal learning? Again we as teachers are also asked to let go of our attachments to outcomes for our students. Are we attached or averse to certain outcomes in our students? For example, do we want to succeed in moving them, to have a life-changing experience, to heal them? On the other, do we want to avoid experiences of backdraft, resistance at a group level (such as “This self-compassion thing isn’t working”) or other challenging feelings that we may feel unsure about how to handle them?

It is perfectly natural that we would like our first teaching experience(s) to “go well”. However, remember that both you and your students will learn more from watching you deal with all experiences – beautiful and challenging – in an openhearted way than experiencing a “sanitized” version of MSC that is not representative of a self-compassion course. In fact, if your students report still only positive experiences by session 3, you should ask explicitly if anyone is experiencing any challenges. This will help de-shame any students who are struggling and feel alienated by the positive reports. If your students never experience any challenges throughout the course, you are not teaching self-compassion! An antidote to attaching to outcomes as a teacher is to remember that resistances and challenges are part of learning self-compassion and to “Hold it lightly” in your mind rather than taking them personally.

### **A Reflection**

- In hindsight, were you attached/averse to any outcomes during your last course?
- If yes, what were they? Did you have any in relation to specific students/the feedback about you or the course/relationship with co-teacher?
- What were you afraid of happening? What do you need to develop to handle this “unwanted” outcome, to hold it more lightly in your mind?

### **Summary of self-compassion skills for teacher and students**

- Be courageous, resolve to care and to become fully human (motivation).
- Establish your safe ground in body and in group (interpersonal/intrapersonal safety).
- Touch the pain (empathic resonance & sensitivity/mindfulness of pain in body).
- Hold your seat knowing that distress cannot harm you (affect tolerance).
- Give yourself love/Soothe the pain (Kindness/Self-kindness).
- Allow pain knowing that it will pass and you are more than this pain (Cognitive empathy/perspective-taking).
- We’re in it together (common humanity).
- Hold it lightly (equanimity).

# Appendix:

MBI-TAC for MSC

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## MSC Teaching Self-Assessment Form

Adapted from: The Bangor, Exeter & Oxford Mindfulness-Based Interventions Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI:TAC)  
*for assessing the competence and adherence of mindfulness-based class-based teaching*  
 Rebecca S. Crane, Judith G. Soulsby, Willem Kuyken, J.Mark G.Williams, Catrin Eames and  
 Trish Bartley, Cindy Cooper, Alison Evans, Melanie J.V.Fennell, Eluned Gold, Jody Mardula, Sarah Silverton

<b>Domains of MSC Teaching Competence</b>	<b>Rating</b>
<p><b>Domain 1: Coverage, pacing and organization of session curriculum</b></p> <p><b>Overview:</b> The teacher adequately addresses and covers the curriculum content of the session. This involves creating a skillful balance between the needs of the individual, the group and the requirements of teaching the course. The teacher is well organized with relevant course materials and teaching aids readily available and the room appropriately prepared for the group. The session is well 'time managed' in relation to the curriculum. The session is well paced with a sense of spaciousness, steadiness and lack of time pressure. Digressions are steered back into the session curriculum with tact and ease.</p>	
<p><b>Domain 2: Relational skills</b></p> <p><b>Overview:</b> MSC teaching is highly relational – the practice engages us in a process of developing a new relationship both with ourselves as the experiencer and with our experience. The qualities that the teacher brings to participants and the teaching process mirror the qualities participants are learning to bring to themselves during the MSC program. The components of MSC, according to Kristin Neff, PhD, are mindfulness (the teacher has the intention to be whole heartedly present with participants in a non-judgmental way), self-kindness (the teacher shows kindness toward the participants, their co-teacher and themselves) and recognition of common humanity (the teacher is willing to share their own experience where appropriate).</p>	
<p><b>Domain 3: Embodiment of mindful self-compassion</b></p> <p><b>Overview:</b> MSC practice permeates the teacher and is expressed through being fully human when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate. Embodiment of MSC involves the teacher sustaining connection and responsiveness to what is arising in the moment (within self, within individuals and within the group) and bringing the core attitudinal foundations of MSC practice to all of this. These attitudes are: adaptability; grounding; affection; acceptance; connecting with core values; equanimity; gratitude; savoring; appreciation; non-judgment; patience; curiosity; authenticity; honesty; clarity; appropriate humor; and non-striving .</p>	

<p><b>Domain 4: Guiding MSC practices</b></p> <p><b>Overview:</b> The teacher offers guidance that describes accurately what the participant is being invited to do in the practice, and includes all the elements required in that practice. The guidance enables participants to relate skillfully to their experience to cultivate the skill of mindful self-compassion. The guidance suggests the attitudes to bring to the experienter and the experience throughout the practice. The practice balances spaciousness with precision. Skillful use of language is key to conveying all this.</p>	
<p><b>Domain 5: Conveying course themes through interactive inquiry and didactic teaching</b></p> <p><b>Overview:</b> This domain assesses the <i>process</i> through which the course themes are conveyed to participants. These are at times explicitly drawn out and underlined by the teacher and at other times emerge implicitly within the process. The domain includes inquiry, group dialogue, use of stories and poems, facilitating group exercises, orienting participants to session/course themes, and didactic teaching.</p>	
<p><b>Domain 6: Holding the group learning environment</b></p> <p><b>Overview:</b> The whole teaching process takes place within the context of a group, which if facilitated effectively becomes a vehicle for connecting participants with the universality of the processes being explored. The teacher creates a ‘container’ or learning environment that ‘holds’ the group and within which the teaching can effectively take place. The teacher works responsively with group process through bringing an appropriate leadership style to the teaching; through taking good care of managing group safety, trust and boundary issues; through employing a teaching style which takes account of the individual within the context of the group, and balances the needs of both; through using the group process to draw out universal learning themes; through working with and responding to group development processes by managing the various phases of group formation, development and ending. The teacher is able to ‘tune into,’ connect with, and respond appropriately to shifts and changes in group mood and characteristics.</p>	

## Levels of MSC Teaching Competence

(adapted from the Dreyfus Scale of Competence, 1986)

Generic definition of overall competence level	Competence band	Rating
Key features are not demonstrated. The teacher makes consistent errors and displays poor and unacceptable teaching, leading to likely or actual negative therapeutic consequences. No real evidence that the teacher has grasped the fundamentals of the MSC teaching process.	<b>Incompetent</b> <i>Absence of key features, or highly inappropriate performance</i>	<b>1</b>
At least one key feature present in most domains, but numerous substantive problems and overall lack of consistency require considerable further development.	<b>Beginner</b> <i>Aspects of competence demonstrated but significant problems evident</i>	<b>2</b>
At least two key features at a competent level in most domains, but one or more major problems and/or significant inconsistencies that require further development. Teachers adequately take care of participants' emotional and physical safety. Teacher would at a very basic level be considered 'fit for practice' as co-teachers / under supervision – the participants would not be harmed and are likely to have opportunities for learning.	<b>Advanced Beginner</b> <i>Evidence of some competence, but numerous problems and lack of consistency</i>	<b>3</b>
Most key features are present in all domains, with possibly some good features, but a number of problems and/or some inconsistencies are present. Teacher demonstrates a workable level of competence and they are clearly 'fit for practice'.	<b>Competent</b> <i>Competent, with some problems and/or inconsistencies</i>	<b>4</b>
All key features are present in all domains, with very few and very minor inconsistencies and evidence of good ability and skill. The teacher is able consistently to demonstrate these skills over the range of aspects to MSC teaching.	<b>Proficient</b> <i>Sustained competence demonstrated with few or minor problems and/or inconsistencies</i>	<b>5</b>
Expected key features are present with evidence of considerable ability. The teaching is particularly inspirational and excellent. The teacher no longer uses rules, guidelines or maxims. He/she has deep tacit understanding of the issues and is able to work in an original and flexible manner. The skills are demonstrated even in the face of difficulties (e.g. challenges from the group).	<b>Advanced</b> <i>Excellent teaching practice, or very good even in the face of participant difficulties</i>	<b>6</b>