Conference Proceeding:
A Business Case for Compassion

Miller, L.

Abstract: Compassion involves being sensitive to suffering in ourselves and others with a motivation to alleviate this suffering (Gilbert, 2009). It is used as one of many strategies that can generate positive wellbeing in a number of environments. Compassion has been used in Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) as a psychotherapeutic tool for a myriad of difficulties (Gilbert, 2009, 2010; Welford, 2016). Recently, attention has been turned to how compassion can be of benefit to the workplace and business world. In this conference workshop, participants learn of what compassion consists, how and in what way it applies to workplaces, and short strategies that can be used to boost compassion at work.

ملخص البحث : ينطوي التراحم على الشعور بالحساسية تجاه المعاناة سواء في أنفسنا أو الآخرين بدافع التخفيف من هذه المعاناة. وقد استخدم التعاطف في "العلاج المرتكز على التراحم" كأداة علاج نفسي لعدد كبير من الصعوبات النفسية. في الآونة الأخيرة ، تحول الاهتمام إلى كيف يمكن أن يكون التعاطف مفيدا لبيئة العمل وعالم الأعمال. في ورشة العمل هذه ، تعرف المشاركون على مكونات التراحم ، وكيف ينطبق على أماكن العمل ، والاستراتيجيات السريعة لتعزيز التعاطف في العمل. تلبي هذه الأنشطة بشكل متزايد أهداف حكومة دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة ، وهي زيادة مستويات الرفاهية الذاتية في أماكن العمل حيث يستفيد الموظفون والعملاء والمؤسسات ككل.

Keywords: Compassion; Business; Wellbeing; United Arab Emirates; Organizations; Compassion Focused Therapy

About the Author: Lydia Miller is a Psychotherapist, currently practicing in The Psychiatry and Therapy Centre in Dubai Healthcare City (UAE). Lydia also lectures in Psychology at Middlesex University, Dubai. Her specialisation lies within Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for depression and anxiety disorders; however, she has an avid interest in what has been called second and third wave therapies across cognitive behavioural and positive psychology models; namely, Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Lydia also has expertise in employee wellbeing and the integration of compassion into the business environment. She has a BSc in Criminology and Psychology and an MSc in Psychology.

Address all correspondence to: lmiller@psychiatryandtherapy.ae

    Compassion dovetails with positive psychology as it focuses on wellbeing and how individuals can flourish (Gilbert, 2009). Compassion is one of many strategies that can be used to

generate positive wellbeing in a number of environments. Compassion can be described as the sensitivity to suffering that is experienced in both the self and other individuals, alongside a dedication to alleviate or prevent some of it (Gilbert, 2009). Thus, compassion involves becoming aware of and noticing another's suffering, empathising with those feelings and attempting to lessen such suffering (Chu, 2016). It has been used in psychotherapy as a way to help alleviate pain and emotional distress with the development of Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) (Gilbert, 2009; 2010). Individuals who are compassionate towards themselves are likely to have greater life satisfaction and happiness, less anxiety and depression and do not fear failure as much as their less self-compassionate counterparts (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Mills, Gilbert, Bellow, McEwan, & Gale, 2007).

From an organizational perspective, some of the most successful companies in the world include compassion into their employee wellbeing strategies. Locally, an employee wellbeing movement has begun in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with the government prioritising wellbeing through its National Program for Happiness and Wellbeing. Employee wellbeing at work has started to gain attention due to the impact it can have on productivity and performance. This is critical in light of the fact that in the Gulf region, stress is reported as the number one concern for employees (Willis Towers Watson, 2015).

There is growing evidence that compassion in the workplace holds many benefits for both employees and customers and is fast becoming a popular tool (Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT), 2014; Chu, 2016; Lilius et al., 2008). Greater compassion in the workplace has shown reductions in sick leave and staff turnover (Dutton, Liliuis, & Kanov, 2007) as well as stronger bonds and connection between colleagues, which improves work performance (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Sutton, 2010). The more compassion is experienced in an organisation, the higher productivity, creativity and job satisfaction. Greater compassion is also known to reduce sickness and recovery time from illness and increase pain tolerance (Dutton, Frost, & Lilius, 2006). Reported feelings of warmth and positive relationships, not salaries, determine employee loyalty (AAT, 2014).

In contrast, creating a target-driven environment or being a critical and demanding leader is not motivating and such environments activate the threat system causing individuals to shut down or feel stressed and anxious (Gilbert, 2017). Creativity also lapses. When overwhelmed and overstimulated by work, it is difficult to respond compassionately to others (Poorkavoos, 2016). Further, anger, criticism and frustration erode employee loyalty (Grant, 2013). Being kind and caring instead creates trust. If a manager for example, demonstrates an open, caring, fair response, others are more likely to follow suit and be committed to these values. Leading with fear is now outdated, yet, unfortunately, still too common.

There is a business case for compassion at work Compassionate environments can be created by showing kindness and care for employees, forgiving mistakes and avoiding blame. Feeling cared for creates positive feelings and moods which in turn increase performance, boost creativity and strengthen resilience in the face of difficulty (Chu, 2016). To foster such compassion, managers and leaders can encourage employees to share concerns, dreams and opportunities. Building trust among teams can increase psychological safety and have positive organizational

outcomes through sharing new ideas and ways of working (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). A leader who is seen to be self-sacrificing, focuses on others and has the interests of others and the group as a whole at heart, is usually followed by loyal and committed employees (Mulder & Nelissen, 2010).

Individuals can also use compassion for themselves when feeling stressed or overwhelmed. In the face of failure or criticism, self-compassion can be helpful. This involves an acceptance of, sensitivity to, and care for one's own emotional pain to the same degree one would respond to the pain of others. There is an acceptance of temporary pain with an intention to alleviate it, as opposed to falling into self-pity, or using avoidance and denial as a means to ignore or overlook such pain (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009). Compassion also carries an acceptance that the experience of failure is universally shared by all, reflective of our common humanity, and more common than what is socially portrayed. Putting experiences into these larger perspectives allows individuals to step back from their thoughts and feelings and avoid over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003).

A self-compassionate act in the workplace, for instance, can include taking a courageous step and asking for help. There is a popular notion in workplace cultures that employees must remain in control and uphold a professional façade at all times. While over-emoting is not the goal, responding to relentless workplace demands nevertheless requires a realization that employees are human, feeling organisms. Overlooking emotions, particularly in the face of stress and workplace demands, can be a dangerous route for organizations to take, creating an environment where employees feel unheard, disappointed, and upset. As a result, employees may act out their lack of satisfaction, may become ill, or may leave. Using compassion acknowledges and reinstates a sense of humanity to the workplace whereby employees and customers feel they are supported, belong, and want to remain in and interact with such organization.

References

Association of Accounting Technicians. (2014). *Britain's workers value companionship and recognition over a big salary, a recent report revealed.* Retrieved from https://www.aat.org.uk/about-aat/press-releases/britains-workers-value-companionship-recognition-over-big-salary

Barnard, L. K., & Curry, J. F. (2011). Self-compassion: Conceptualizations, correlates, & interventions. *Review of General Psychology, 15*(4), 289-303.

Chu, L, C. (2016). Mediating positive moods: The impact of experiencing compassion at work. *Journal of Nursing Management, 24*(1), 59-69.

Dutton, J. E., Lilius, J. M., & Kanov, J. M. (2007). The transformative potential of compassion at work. In S. K. Piderit, R. E. Fry, & D. L. Cooperrider (Eds.), *Handbook of transformative cooperation: New designs and dynamics* (pp. 107-124). Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books.

Dutton, J. E., Worline, M. C., Frost, P. J., & Lilius, J. M. (2006). Explaining compassion organizing. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 51*, 59-96.

Edmundson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological safety: The history, renaissance, and future of an interpersonal construct. *The Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 1*, 23- 43.

Gilbert, P. (2009). *The compassionate mind: A new approach to life's challenges.* London, UK: Constable.

Gilbert, P. (2010). *Compassion focused therapy: The CBT distinctive features series.* Hove, East Sussex, UK: Routledge

Gilbert, P. (2017). *Living like crazy.* York, UK: Annwyn House.

Grant, A. (2013). *Give and take: Why helping others drives our success.* New York, USA: Penguin.

Lilius, J. M., Worline, M.C., Maitlis, S., Kanov, J., Dutton, J. E., & Frost, P. (2008). The contours and consequences of compassion at work. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 28,* 193–218.

Mills, A., Gilbert, P., Bellew, R., McEwan, K., & Gale, C. (2007). Paranoid beliefs and self-criticism in students. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy, 14,* 358 –364.

Mulder, L. B., & Nelissen, R. M. A. (2010). When rules really make a difference: The effect of cooperation rules and self- sacrificing leadership on moral norms in social dilemmas. *Journal of Business Ethics, 95,* 57-72.

Neff, K. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 2,* 223–250.

Neff, K. D., Rude, S. S., & Kirkpatrick, K. L. (2007). An examination of self-compassion in relation to positive psychological functioning and personality traits. *Journal of Research in Personality, 41,* 908-916.

Poorkavoos, M. (2016). *Compassionate leadership: What is it and why do organisations need more of it.* Rofrey Park Institute. Retrieved from https://www.roffeypark.com/wp-content/uploads2/Compassionate-Leadership-Booklet.pdf

Shepherd, D, A., & Cardon, M, S. (2009). Negative emotional reactions to project failure and the self-compassion to learn from the experience. *Journal of Management Studies, 46,* 923-949.

Sutton, R. I. (2010). Managing yourself: The boss as human shield. *Harvard Business Review, 88*(9), 106-109.

Welford, M. (2016). *Compassion focused therapy for dummies.* Wiley: Sussex.

Willis Towers Watson. (2015). 2015/2016 Global Staying@Work Survey. Retrieved from https://www.towerswatson.com/en-AE/Insights/IC-Types/Surveys/2015/2015-2016-global-staying-at-work-survey?webSyncID=426a7d0d-cbb6-2612-6c09-a7027b940ccb&sessionGUID=37da5372-116c-586b-0d43-aa12104e624e