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You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

--- Episode ---

My name is Sarah Paper and I'm a Licensed Psychologist with Allina Health. I work primarily with kids and teens, in addition to a few adults. I am excited to be able to be part of this project and I have to admit I feel a bit guilty for taking up some of your time. I can only imagine how stressful it must be to be a teacher right now. These last few years have forced you all to do your jobs under conditions you were not trained for with students who are faced with challenges we never knew to prepare them for, many of whom have been living with parents who have been taking on parenting in ways they never anticipated.

In preparation for this podcast, I googled the definition of compassion. This not so extensive research provided me with the following definitions: to suffer together; to recognize the suffering of others and then take action to help; an empathic understanding of a person's feelings, accompanied by a desire to act on that person's behalf... I'll stop there, as I know you all have google too. So, as I find myself in this state of compassion for all of you, I get to take this small action in an effort to help.

"Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive."

— **Dalai Lama**

There has been research suggesting that people may make an effort to avoid compassion, finding it taxing. The pandemic has left people drained and without the emotional resources to access compassion. Like many things, when an active is the most challenging, is when we need it the most. We also benefit from providing compassion for others. Research has shown that when we feel compassion, our heart rate slows down, we secrete the "bonding hormone" oxytocin, and regions of the brain linked to [empathy](#), [caregiving](#), and [feelings of pleasure](#) light up, which often results in our wanting to approach and care for other people.

That calmer state is not only good for our physical and mental health, and it helps to respond more compassionately to others, which de-escalates situations, or minimally does not escalate conflicts, and in the end provides everyone with a healthier environment.

So how do we access and express compassion? First, slow down and focus on being mindful and present. I learned a great deal from the PBS classic Super Why. A simple phrase is repeated throughout each episode, "But why?" We may be skilled at noticing the behaviors that are problematic or disruptive but it takes just a little more energy to stop and ask "BUT Why?" Allow your mind to come up with 1-3 very generous and nonjudgmental reasons. It helps to assume the best of others one attempting to access compassion. This should help those feelings of shared suffering surface. The next step is to think about what this other person might need. Lastly, do what you can to offer or assist with that need. It is better to be wrong and to have tried than to have ignored and avoid compassion.

As I look over questions teachers poses for this project, I was moved to be honest. Here's one: What advice do you have for educators who go home at night exhausted and feel that they are failing all of their students?

That one's pretty heavy. And how about this one: There are so many needs and so little time - How do we maintain a sense of efficacy in our work when we go home at night knowing that we were unable to address so many of our student's needs?

This question helped me really appreciate how much compassion teachers do have for their students and there's a need for self-compassion.

Compassion for self really isn't different from compassion for others. The same steps are there. You first need to notice the suffering you're experiencing, allow yourself to acknowledge and understand that suffering, and then be motivated to help yourself. Having self-compassion also means that you are honoring and accepting your humanness. If you are finding yourself particularly interested in Self-Compassion, Dr. Kristin Neff will likely pop up in your google search. She has self-compassion measures, exercises, and resources. Dr. Neff lists three elements of self-compassion. 1. Self-kindness versus self-judgment. 2. Common Humanity versus Isolation. 3. Mindfulness versus over-identification.

1. Self-kindness versus self-judgment.

This entails being understanding towards ourselves when we're suffering, when we fail, or feel inadequate, and rather than ignoring our pain and beating ourselves up, we have that self-compassion and recognize that being imperfect, failing, it's all part of life's difficulties; it's inevitable. When we are faced with painful experiences, rather than getting angry, acknowledge that people including ourselves do not always get what we want out of life, do not always act the way we want to, do not always achieve what we want to. In many ways, we can think of it as a radical acceptance of ourselves and of life in general. We often say to other people, "I understand that people make mistakes," but we don't always tell ourselves "oh, it's ok - people make mistakes and I'm going to fail sometimes." And by doing that, or rather by not doing that, by treating ourselves differently and holding ourselves to a higher standard and not giving ourselves permission to make mistakes, we end up responding to those mistakes with self-criticism and harsh judgment of ourselves.

2. Common humanity versus isolation.

Frustration at not having things exactly as we want is often accompanied by then irritation and this sense of isolation as if we're the only person who is suffering or making mistakes. When in reality, all humans suffer. The very definition of being human means that one is mortal, vulnerable, and imperfect. So having self-compassion means recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacies are part of a shared human experience - something that we all go through, rather than something that's only happening to me. And I know it can be hard in those moments when we go through something to be able to see past ourselves and recognize that other people are suffering. But when we do that, when we only see our own pain, we feel very alone on top of the pain we're feeling and we're not able to access that self-compassion that we need.

3. Mindfulness versus over-identification.

Self-compassion also requires taking a balanced approach in response to our uncomfortable emotions. We don't want to deny or suppress those uncomfortable feelings, but we also don't want to exaggerate them. We need to find that place where we can acknowledge our suffering, but not over-attend to it. We can do this in a state of mindfulness, which is a non-judgmental receptive mind state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are without trying to suppress or deny them. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time; we have to attend to it first, obviously. At the same time, mindfulness requires that we not overidentify with it. So if we think about even just being aware of our physical sensations, because sometimes that's easier to think about - so, we would notice if we had a headache and we'd take care of it. But if we kept thinking over and over again and only thought about that sensation of our head hurting, we would be ignoring other things and also amplifying

our pain beyond where it is truly at. The last thing we need or want to do is make our pain bigger than it is.

So those are our three steps according to Dr. Kristin Neff: 1. Self-kindness versus self-judgment. 2. Common Humanity versus Isolation. 3. Mindfulness versus over-identification.

And I'd like to quote myself right now, it's a term I'm trying to get to catch on, which is the platinum rule – do unto yourself as you would do unto others.

Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to this, I greatly appreciate it.

---Outro---

On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at www.changetochill.org. In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!