**NHS Education for Scotland**

**Talking about Bereavement Podcast Series – Transcript of ‘The Self-Compassionate Space in Bereavement’ Podcast**

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**Speaker**: Dr Wendy Simpson, Health Psychologist, NHS Fife

**LI**: Hi, I'm Lynne Innes. I'm a Senior Educator at NHS Education for Scotland, otherwise known as NES, in the Bereavement workstream. In this podcast, I'm going to introduce you to the work that our team does, share what we do, and also share our learning. So what is NES Bereavement? When I ask this question, sometimes people aren't sure what we do. However, in essence, it's putting people at the heart of bereavement care and our aim is to support health and social care staff to do that for the people in their care. We know that there is evidence to suggest that person-centered care and bereavement matters, as it improves people's experience. So, bereavement care and communication with those who are grieving is core business for many staff groups across health and social care. We're also aware that if it's purely handled there can be the risk of causing additional harm, with subsequent negative impact on staff wellbeing.

**LI**: This podcast will explore self-compassion in bereavement, and the importance of that as we seek to care for ourselves and others. So, I'd like to introduce you to Wendy. I'll be talking to Wendy Simpson, who, Dr Wendy Simpson, who is a Health Psychologist in NHS Fife, with a research background. She currently specialises in developing and facilitating training courses for promoting staff wellbeing. She has a strong interest and focus on mindfulness and compassion in her work with staff, and is keen to promote self-compassion as a powerful tool for looking after ourselves, especially when we're experiencing difficulty.

**LI**: Hi Wendy, and thanks so much for joining me today for this podcast on self-compassion. I'm just wondering how, how's your day going? How are you today?

**WS**: Oh, thanks. Nice to see you. Fine, I'm just enjoying the warm, warmer weather and the, seeing the daffodils. I’ve been out walking my very old dog, whose, plods along behind me so I can go nice and slowly and I'm not always worried about trying to chase after her, the way I used to. So yeah, it's been a lovely, really nice, mild day.

**LI**: Yeah, yeah. It's a nice day actually today. We're recording this in early spring, so it's nice to kind of think that the weather might be changing as we move forwards into the summer. So yeah, this helps, doesn't it? So, you've joined us today to talk about self-compassion. I know that we've worked together, and we've done some work on wellbeing in self-compassion. And I've certainly learned a lot from you around self-compassion over the last year. And it's just to explore that kind of concept of, what, what is self-compassion? And I wondered if you would, you would kind of help us with that and give us the benefit of your knowledge and expertise around self-compassion?

**WS**: Okay, thank you. It was, it's one of the ways that we can look after our wellbeing, and self-compassion is, is a really powerful way of looking after our wellbeing. It's, it’s very much part of the tradition and spiritual traditions and religious traditions, but more, but now, there's so much research around self-compassion that's really quite exciting. It's kind of taken off. So, what actually is it? We often talk about compassion, but it's, it’s defined as, I think, the Dalai Lama defines it as sensitivity, the sensitivity to the suffering of self and others but with a deep commitment to try and relieve it. So, it's kind of, awareness of suffering, but also really wanting to do something about it, for ourselves and for other people. And Kristin Neff is one of the, sort of, main scientists. She's a psychologist that's been working in this area. So, she talks about how self-compassion’s, it, it can seem quite complex. There's lots and lots of books about it, but actually, a real simple way I think of thinking about it is treating ourselves like a good friend so, or, someone that we really care about. So, if we think about how we, how we feel about how someone that we care about, what we'd want to say to them, how we'd, if they were really struggling, how we, how we'd come across to them, both with our kind of body language and our tone of voice but also the things that we'd say. And we're all, we're all different that way, so, it’s, it's kind of important to think about how we would treat a good friend. Whether we want to help them practically or whether we want to just be there for them, whether we want to give them a hug and these things that, the way we would treat a good friend is the way that would work best for how we want to be treated as well.

**LI**: It's not scripted then as to how we do it. There's not a template for how we do it.

**WS**: No.

**LI**: It's important that it's individualised.

**WS**: I think that's important to remember, that, yeah, so, it's very much about your own way of being kind to yourself. And I, I like the way Kristin Neff talks about, I'll talk about the three components of self-compassion in a minute but she, she compares self-esteem to self-compassion. And I think that's really important to think about that because we often think about our self-esteem being really important for our wellbeing. And building up our self-esteem. But actually, self-esteem is all about evaluating ourselves, and that, that's a, a judgment on ourselves. Whereas self-compassion is, so it's almost like if you think about self-esteem, it's almost like a spotlight’s on you, and you're having to behave and you're having to do well and you're having to reach a, an ideal self. And that's just really stressful and you're always striving, and it’s, it’s hard work, and you may be criticising yourself because you're not getting there. Whereas self-compassion is, is that kind of relief of almost that harbour, of somewhere that's always there for you, rather than a spotlight being on you. It's a harbour that, that's, or a or a light that's within you, if you like, that's shining and able to, to, to be there for you when you're having a bad day. Self-esteem’s not there for you when you're having a bad day. But self, self-compassion is always there, whether you're having a good day or a bad day. And that's why it's really important to nurture it for our wellbeing.

**LI**: Yeah, yeah. And I think, we, we struggle with that culturally though, don't we? We struggle with being self-compassionate and being kind to ourselves and treating ourselves kindly and we, we're not going to get into how that, how that has evolved in our culture as such, but perhaps, but how does that, you know, how do we make that a, make that different?

**WS**: Yeah, it's a, it's an interesting one. People have a very, most people have a very strong concept of criticising themselves and beating themselves up. And they're quite able to talk about how they beat themselves up, almost as if that's just quite normal. And like, even for today's session with you I was thinking oh, my mind's going to go blank, and I'm not going to be able to do this. And I'm thinking, but that's a real judgmental approach that is so sort of common and it just, it makes you freeze. It makes you think, well, I can't you know, I can't do this, and I'm rubbish. And it's just, it's so common and that, that actually has this really negative effect on our body, because it's almost like someone else, it's almost as bad as some, someone else saying to us, ‘oh you're rubbish at this, you know you're, you're not, you're not capable of doing this, oh you're going to freeze and that's going to look terrible and that's’, rather than, you know, self-compassion takes a very different approach which says it's okay, it’s okay not to be perfect. You know, we're all human. It's okay to be yourself. It's okay just to kind of, go with, go with the flow and see what comes up. And that's, that’s the self-compassionate approach which is just much more, warm and reassuring and I can just almost feel it, just saying these words myself now.

**LI**: Yeah, I was just going to say, I'm noticing how gentle that sounded. Actually, it sounded really gentle, and soothing, it did. I was thinking that as you were seeing it and I was watching you saying it obviously because I can see you, and yeah, there is something really, really gentle about the way in which you said that and, and how, how, how, how can we be more kind to ourselves and caring?

**WS**: Yeah, well, well we often speak to ourselves in a way that we would never speak to someone that we, that we care about. So yeah, and how, how can we be more self-compassionate? Well, Kristin Neff, as I said I was going to say, talks about the three elements of self-compassion, which are mindfulness, which is basically just awareness that we're suffering. So instead of just sort of getting caught up in the story of, you know, my daughter phoned me today and she's late in getting something organised again, and she's always late in getting things organised, and I was just getting really frustrated. And why can't you just get things organised? Because it, because I know that she's frustrated and that makes me feel upset. And, but, then I'm thinking, so, so self-compassion is, is not just getting, it's not getting caught up in that story and just thinking oh I have to just deal with it. It's actually saying, look I'm, I’m suffering here. Just that awareness of I'm suffering here. Do I need to, do I really need to suffer because she's suffering, or can I just sort of stand back and look at that and say I'm suffering and then it's much more helpful because it can help you to think right what am I going to do about this, so it’s that, that awareness but, what am I going to do about this? So it's for all these little things, even these little, what seem like minor frustrations, because that can really affect your day when they really build up. So that's the first element, is that, having to be aware that we're suffering, whether we're feeling guilty, whether we're feeling frustrated or whether we're feeling sad. And then, the second element is common humanity. And that's that sense of, you, we're all in this together that, that we're connected as human beings. And you know, it's not just me. There'll be other people. There'll be other mothers out there who are frustrated with their kids. There'll be others who are sad and have had experienced loss. There'll be others that are feeling guilty about something they've done or not done. I'm really not the only one here. So that kind of gives you that sense of connection. And then the third element is kindness. Just the simple act of what can I, what can I do? What, what can I do to relieve this? What do I need right now? And it might just be as simple as actually having realised that you're suffering, or you're creating that suffering just with your thoughts. Or it might be that you need a breath, a deep breath. You might need to have a, a moment of fresh air. You might need a cup of tea, or you might need counselling, you know it, it's all these different things and different levels of things. So that's, that's the three elements.

**LI**: So, so the three elements are mindful and being aware, common humanity and, and kindness?

**WS**: Yes.

**LI**: Yeah. And it sounds quite straightforward, really, doesn't it? And so I wonder, you know, because we're talking about this, a bereavement podcast, I wonder how that fits in around. Is there anything different we need to do when we think about bereavement, or grief and bereavement? Is there, is there anything different around that for self-compassion, or are, is it all transferable?

**WS**: I think it's very transferable. I, I think it's just that self-compassion is a really, really useful tool or skill. It is a skill. It's a, it's a wellbeing skill. It's something we can learn to do and even if it's not particular, might not be habitual, but it, it's something we can learn to do. And I think it's a, bereavement is a time that it becomes a very useful tool. Because often when we're bereaved, you know, it often really matters to us that we've got the energy to keep going, because there's lots to do, sometimes when we're bereaved, especially if it’s a really close person in our family. We want to not only really care for our own feelings, but we also might want to care for other people. And its self-compassion gives you that energy to cope with that. Because it's not about, it's not about, because often you can really drown in your feelings, can't you? You can really get caught up and really drown and feel overwhelmed. Whereas self-compassion actually gives us that ability to step back and say I'm suffering. What do I, what do I, you know, and these are my feelings and I'm feeling them and allow yourself to feel them but you're there for yourself and, and what do I need to do for myself just to, to, to handle it? And it might be these little things that you do that that actually help you to handle it. So it's not about, so it might be a time where you, you can really use self-compassion more than anything. Often people confuse self-compassion with self-pity, but it's not, it's not self-pity. Self-pity is when we're unable to bear our suffering, whereas self-compassion is when we're actually learning to support ourselves through our suffering so that we don't become overwhelmed. Does that make sense?

**LI**: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I hadn't thought about it like that. But I think, yeah, thinking about self-pity and that, and that, the real difference around that and self-compassion. So, is there any, I suppose is there anything we can give people listening to this podcast, you know, some little kind of tips or anything they can take away into their, into their daily lives around self-compassion and bereavement? You did mention a couple of things I think before we started, ‘RAIN’ and something else, I think.

**WS**: So, there's some sort of, there's formal practices but there's also I think that I'll talk about in a minute, but I think there's something almost even more important that it's, it’s thinking about just how to, on a daily basis, how to talk to ourselves, how to be more self-compassionate in our daily lives. And so, it's it’s about basically saying things to yourself, like when you're feeling exhausted, or when you wake up in the morning feeling really tired or anxious and saying oh, that's okay, I'm human. It's not really surprising that I'm tired, considering that all I've, all I've been doing and feeling. And allowing yourself to rest as soon as you possibly can, or just sort of, that awareness that it's okay to be tired and it's not surprising you're tired rather than beating yourself up about it. And just that way of speaking to yourself is much more likely to, to just make you feel able to cope or able to say actually I do need to rest right now. It's almost that there's a, there's a level of compassion that's that Kristin Neff calls fierce compassion where it’s.

**LI:** Oh yeah.

**WS:** It’s not all about just necessarily being really gentle with yourself. It was actually standing up for yourself as well, and saying, hey these are my boundaries, I'm, I’m having to say no to doing this just now and suppose so that that really, is relevant with bereavement, isn't it. It's like I can't just keep going on. I'm saying no, I can't cope with all of this. So that that's fierce sort of mummy bear self-compassion like.

**LI:** Okay.

**WS:** You know so the gentle self-compassion is like protecting yourself like holding yourself and, and nurturing your emotions and saying it's okay to feel these feelings. Whereas the fierce self-compassion is the, is the compassion of you're being hurt or someone's, you know, you're, if you imagine a child and, and you really care about them, and they're being bullied or they're being hurt in some way, you want to protect them. So that, there’s that element, and you can, so it's doing that for yourself as well, so it's protecting yourself. Does that make sense?

**LI:** Yeah. And I haven't really heard of fierce compassion before. So that sounds, that sounds really, yeah, something to think about, actually. Fierce compassion, it's that real protection. I hadn't really thought about it in connection with setting boundaries, which we, you know, we try to, we some of us may try to do and as an ongoing work in progress, really. But I hadn't thought about that as being, there’s something about thinking about that as fierce compassion, as being I’m really protecting myself.

**WS:** And, and I also think it's good to think of compassion not just as a soft, fluffy thing.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**WS:** Because it's actually a really strong courageous thing to do. It's really kind of radical. So, and, and there's also other things you can say to yourself like just being gentle with yourself when you can't get motivated, or you know you're in a really low mood and it's ok you're doing your best and some days are just hard. And it will just pass. That way of speaking to yourself, keeping coming, keep coming back to how you would speak to someone that you really care about. And it's work, that's what's worked for me. It's constantly because I was a very, I have a very strong self, naturally, I have a very strong self-critic sort of perfectionist tendency. So, but I'm, I really care about my two daughters, my twin daughters, and I keep trying to remember what I would say to them.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**WS:** And that's how I try to speak to myself. And it's also, it's also about saying you know when you're feeling really anxious or, or sad or scared which is particularly normal during a period of bereavement that, that that's ok, it's ok to have these feelings and you might want to have, you might just even have to have some time off. Quite a lot. You might even need a lot of time off to actually just really feel these feelings and actually feeling them rather than pushing them away is actually much more effective for our wellbeing. We seem to think it's, we should be pushing them away, trying to not feel these feelings.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's right. Yeah.

**WS:** So often the kindest thing we can do to ourselves in these situations is to, to really be aware of how our body feels. Feeling these feelings and then maybe even noticing where we're feeling it in our body, whether it's in our hearts or in our throats or in our bellies.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**WS:** And then using techniques of relaxation or breathing to breathe into these parts of the body. And that's the way of really holding, holding these feelings. I, I was, I was involved recently with teaching kind of mindfulness and self-compassion to, to parents who work with little children and there's a, there’s a website we were using, and it was it, it, it basically described, I really liked it because it was basically describing our feelings almost like little animals in our body.

**LI:** Ah right.

**WS:** And noticing these little animals and, and actually having to give them a hug because they're part of who we are.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**WS:** You know whether there's a little animal of anxiety or they're a little animal of fear or the little animal of sadness and just saying oh, you're there and you're there for a reason.

**LI:** Yeah.

**WS:** And you're important.And I'm going to give you a wee hug.

**LI:** Maybe we need that for adults too.

**WS:** But also, I just wanted to, one more thing I really wanted to say that also, I think it's about being true to who you really are. So, to what. Self-compassion is not just about all these nurturing things and, and the, it’s about finding out what really matters to you and what you value and what, what you, what really gives you energy and, and, and what makes you smile and what do you really need rather than what other people think you might need and trying to focus on these things as much as possible. There’s a lovely quote by Mary Oliver, my favourite poet, who says ‘let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.’ And I think, I just love that, that line.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.That's been really fascinating listening to you talking about self-compassion and actually hearing a bit more, hearing about fierce compassion because I hadn't really heard about that before. But also thinking about how we can apply that when in bereavement and grief and, and as we acknowledge how hard and difficult that is for us. So, thank you so much for taking the time to, to come and do this podcast it's been really great listening to you and love, thank you for that lovely gentle bit in the middle of the, the podcast as well that was, that was felt like self-compassion to us both. So, thank you so much for that.

**WS:** No problem lovely to speak to you.

**LI:** I hope that you've enjoyed listening to Wendy talking about self-compassion and thanks so much for listening.Take care and hope you can join us for future podcasts.

The podcast was recorded in March 2023 and can be found at <https://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/events/podcast-series/> or <https://talkingaboutbereavement.podbean.com/>

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