

Creating Compassion



Developing Self-Compassion in the Workplace – Public Sector

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The impact of stress in the public sector

The CIPD's 2019 'Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey' reports the results of the public sector's approach to managing employee wellbeing and absence, and the challenges it faces.

Key findings include:

- On average, public sector employees had 8.4 days of absence over the last year
- Mental ill health is particularly prevalent in the public sector. It is the main cause of long-term absence (followed by stress) and among the top causes of short-term absence
- Moreover, nearly three-quarters of organisations in the public sector (72%) have experienced an increase in reported common mental health conditions over the past year
- Nearly half (49%) of public sector respondents report an increase in stress-related absence
- The vast majority of public sector organisations (87%) have observed presenteeism (working when unwell) in their organisation over the past year and over a quarter (28%) report it has increased over this period
- 'Leaveism' (using leave inappropriately, such as working when on holiday or when unwell, or working in one's own time to get work done) is also commonplace
- Presenteeism and leaveism can indicate high levels of anxiety and organisational issues (such as a long-hours culture or excessive workloads) that can affect employees' health and wellbeing as well as wider organisational performance.
- Just half of respondents believe their organisation is effective at supporting staff with mental ill health or that it actively promotes good mental wellbeing
- Less than a third of respondents in the public sector agree that senior leaders encourage a focus on mental health through their actions and behaviour

However, what is clear is that organisations that take a more proactive approach and conduct critical evaluation of their activity, to ensure continuous improvement, are considerably more likely to achieve positive organisational outcomes in regard to employee health and wellbeing.



Implications of the impact of stress in the public sector

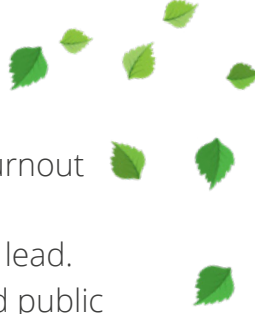
As the findings from the latest CIPD Survey suggest, public sector staff are at great risk of burning out from the stress involved in delivering high quality services to large numbers of the general public. In the context of a steady increase in demand for public services amongst the UK population, it can be assumed that the requirements for providing appropriate services are expected to rise exponentially in the coming years. It is already well documented that every public sector organisation is faced with unprecedented levels of financial constraint and the daily reality of delivering more with less. Compassionate public services are rightly mandated, but this often leaves a question as to how staff are enabled and supported to consistently act with compassion towards the public without detriment to their own wellbeing (Egan et al., 2016).

With today's uncertain outlook, further prompted by the implications of Brexit and pressing global concerns, the age of anxiety appears never ending to many. The immense challenge of operating in the current constantly shifting economy only increases stress and other mental health related issues which has an impact on all of us, particularly those who are responsible for leading others in their organisation and system. Compassion is central to the practice of leadership (Georges, 2011) and leadership is recognised as the most important influence on an organisation's culture (West et al., 2014).

Developing self-compassion in a public sector setting

For authentic compassion to be established and maintained, in an ever changing and constantly challenging economy, we need to understand what this means to the individuals responsible for designing and delivering public services. We have found that providing training to individuals to develop their self-compassion, can have profound effects on the way they view themselves and the compassion they are able to give to others in their working lives. As occupational psychologists, we have found this approach can impact widely on the fabric of participants' organisations, as they become compassion champions and lead the way in terms of policy, processes and working practices.

Developing self-compassion provides the tools and techniques to more adequately self-support and replenish emotional and physical resources, so as to increase resilience to deal with the demands of any role more effectively. We would therefore suggest that our programmes which outline the theory and practice of self-compassion are aimed at the needs of all public sector professionals.



Practices are introduced to help ease caregiver stress, compassion fatigue and burnout with the aim of cultivating equanimity in public facing roles. This applies equally to managers as they hold the responsibility for the care and welfare of the staff they lead. All our programmes are based on specifically addressing the needs of leaders and public sector professionals, having been developed over many years based on feedback from numerous public sector organisations.

Background to self-compassion

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Our every interaction every day shapes our world. To the extent that we are present with and pay attention to all those we interact with, understand their challenges, empathise with them, and take action to help them, we create a more compassionate world. To have the capacity and resilience to show compassion to others, we must first practice self-compassion.

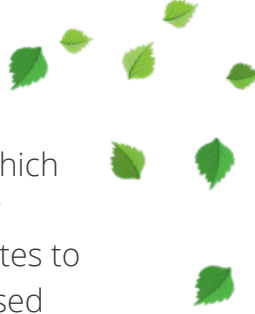
Professor Michael West, Lancaster University Management School, 2017

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To provide a sense of the background to this work, it is understood, from both an academic and research perspective, that the understanding and practice of self-compassion is critical for individuals to be able to offer authentic and sustainable compassion to others (Gilbert, 2009; Neff, 2011). In fact, it can be stated that, “self-compassion is the foundation of compassion for others” Germer (2009).

Through the programmes we have designed and delivered so far, we have found that providing training to individuals to develop their self-compassion has had profound effects on the way they view themselves and the compassion they are able to give to others – both personally and professionally. Some participants on previous programmes have described the approach to be “life-changing” and have found that their attendance has significantly enhanced the interactions they are able to have in their working environment.

Practising self-compassion takes on greater importance when we are in a helping profession. In the course of our work, we speak with public sector professionals on a daily basis and they readily acknowledge how rarely they pause to notice how they themselves are feeling and how easily they can neglect their own needs. The self-compassion programmes we have developed are specifically designed to help public sector professionals and leaders better understand their own needs and learn to respond to themselves with kindness and compassion. The content is based on the premise that through our own practice, the knowing that comes from doing, we can best help others.



The academic research on self-compassion advocates three main components, which underpin the training we deliver – self-kindness – as opposed to self-criticism; our connection to others – as opposed to a sense of isolation; mindfulness which relates to noticing how we are feeling in the present moment without judgement – as opposed to over-identifying with our emotions and automatically responding (Neff, 2003). These elements form the basis of both the theoretical and practical concepts we introduce to the participants on all the programmes we offer in this subject area. Through the use of guided and experiential exercises, the participants gain practical skills to help bring self-compassion into their daily lives.

Our approach to developing self-compassion

Self-compassion can initially be a challenging concept to many of us. Our individualistic western culture doesn't promote our connection to others, and we have few role models to show us how to self-care. It is difficult for us to always know how we feel as well as how to handle perfectly natural emotional responses to difficult situations. Many of us act with compassion towards others, especially those we care for, but struggle to show the same care to ourselves and may find it difficult to accept compassion from others. The evidence shows that we can learn how to develop self-compassion, in fact the research and our experience has displayed that it is **entirely trainable skill**. We can become self-supporting in replenishing our stocks so that we are more able to show compassion to ourselves and others, in an authentic and sustainable way – both at work and closer to home.

Dr Amanda Super first became interested in self-compassion a number of years ago. She came to the realisation that building clients' self-esteem did not appear to assist them in times of difficulty and challenge. This is because self-esteem is dependent on everything going well and fails to provide us with any resilience to manage the unavoidable obstacles which are part of our lives. Amanda was assisting a number of senior leaders in the public sector develop their resilience to manage the inevitable challenge, in a constantly changing and ever-demanding work environment when she came across the work of Dr Kristin Neff. From this, she began to incorporate Neff's research into her leadership development practice and the results were proving invaluable to her clients.

Neff's (2003) pioneering work saw the development of a valid and reliable scale to measure self-compassion considering the components of self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. All three components, when delivered together have been shown to increase compassion for others (Jazaieri et al., 2013; Neff and Germer, 2013; Neff and Pommier, 2013) in addition to increased resilience and emotional intelligence (Heffernan et al., 2010; Neff and McGehee, 2010). In fact, self-compassion has been shown to be a protective factor for a wide range of well-being indicators (Duarte, 2016) including mental health.

All applications we deliver, specifically look to provide a complete introduction to the science of self-compassion and all content is based on the latest academic research, data and best practice. All training and development enables learning and practice of the key principles underpinning this ground-breaking approach and looks to promote participants' health and wellbeing in both their personal and working environments. The research study outlined shows how our core training programme – **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** – was empirically tested and the exceptional results that were found. This programme, as well as being a standalone intervention, also underpins our **Compassionate Leadership Coaching Programme**.

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Executive Summary



Aims

Self-compassion has been suggested as an approach that may support the health and wellbeing of individuals and enable them to stay well at work. The purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of a novel brief self-guided online intervention – **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** in a public sector sample. The study aimed to understand whether the programme improved the health and wellbeing of public sector staff and if these improvements were maintained at follow up.



Intervention

The Self-Compassion at Work Programme draws on the three core components of self-compassion (self-kindness/common humanity/mindfulness) as defined by Neff (2003). The programme is a four-week online intervention designed by Dr Amanda Super to develop individuals' self-compassion in the workplace. The programme consists of four pre-recorded training webinars covering the theory and practice of self-compassion, which can be engaged with at any time of day at a rate of one per week. Other programme materials include a daily reflective diary for the four-week period, a short weekly key task relating to the content of each webinar and an action plan to chart progress. **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** has a suggested total delivery time of eight-hours across four weeks.



Design and Method

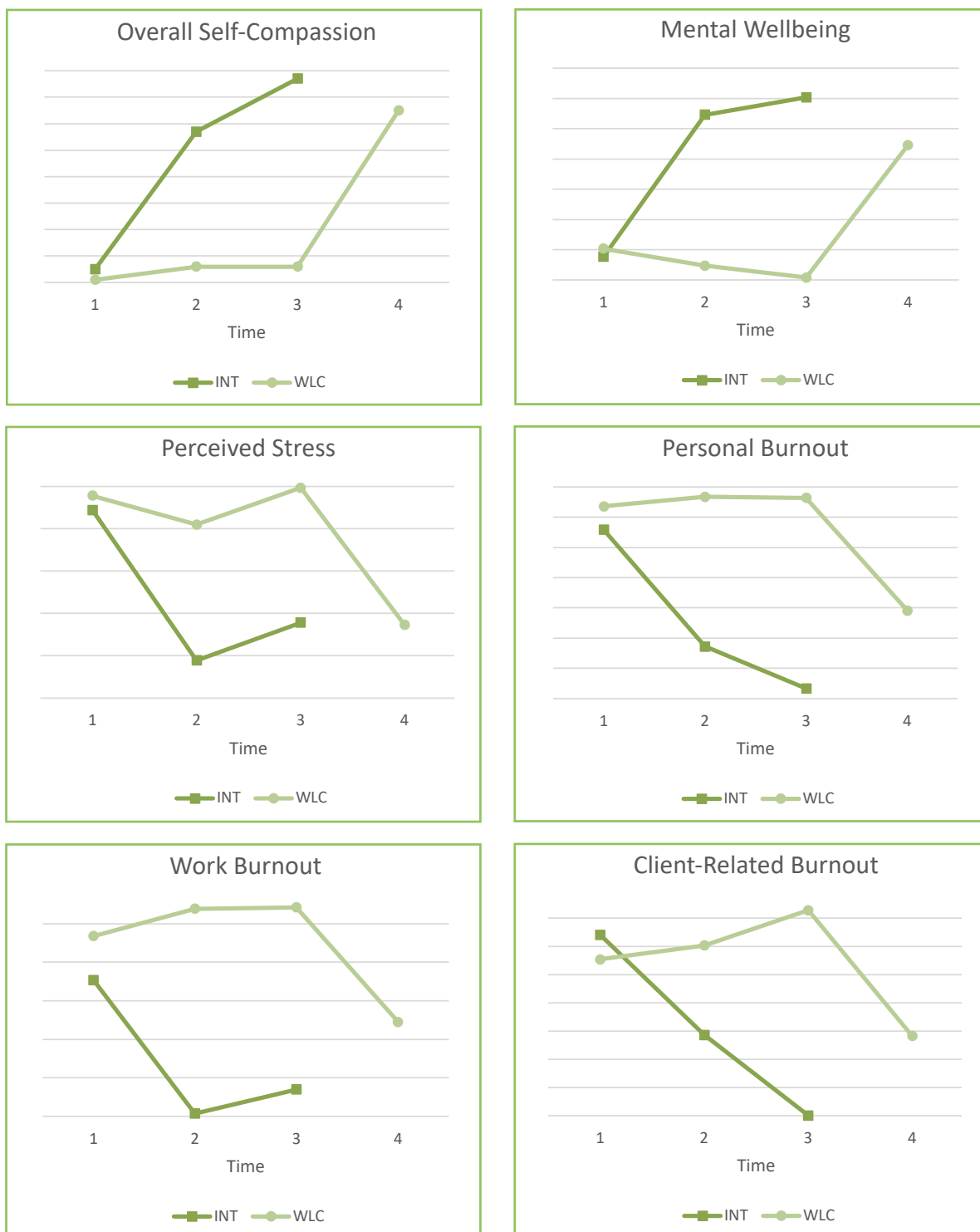
In a randomised controlled trial, 190 public sector staff were assigned to an intervention group (n.110) or a waitlist control group (n.80). Pre and post-programme data were collected from both groups and at one-month follow up, from the intervention group. The waitlist control group also provided data immediately following their completion of the programme.



Quantitative Results

The results showed a significant group by time interaction ($d=1.46$, $p<.001$) with a large overall effect size for **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** for the intervention group compared to the waitlist control group across time. Results also showed a significant effect of the programme on all the main study variables and the six Self-Compassion Scale subscales. Large effect sizes were seen for overall self-compassion ($d=1.07$) and self-kindness ($d=.95$); medium effects sizes for over-identification ($d=.80$), mental wellbeing ($d=.77$), self-judgement ($d=.77$), mindfulness ($d=.76$), common humanity ($d=.72$), isolation ($d=.59$), personal burnout ($d=.50$) and work burnout ($d=.50$); and small effect sizes for perceived stress ($d=.41$) and client-related burnout ($d=.38$).

Change in mean scores for intervention and waitlist control groups for main study outcome variables



N.B. From T1-T3 Total N=114. Time 1 = Before treatment for Intervention Group and Waitlist Control Group; Time 2 = After treatment for Intervention Group, Wait period for Waitlist Control Group; Time 3 = One-month Follow Up for Intervention Group, Wait period for Waitlist Control Group; Time 4 = After Treatment for Waitlist Control Group (n=48)

The findings confirmed the hypothesis that The Self-Compassion at Work Programme significantly improves the self-reported health and wellbeing of public sector staff and these benefits are maintained at one-month follow up.



Qualitative Findings

The post-programme evaluation completed by participants were arranged under a variety of headings employing 1-7 Likert Scales (1=low,7=high) to rate satisfaction and allowing for free text comments.



Self-Compassion at Work Programme Content

In terms of satisfaction with the content of the programme, respondents reported mean ratings of 6.10 for webinar one, 6.13 for webinar two, 6.14 for webinar three and 6.18 for webinar four.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding the programme content are:

“ All the Webinars were **useful** and **easy to follow**. ”

“ Content and delivery were **excellent** – I felt like you were in the room just talking to me. ”

“ The **right amount of information** provided, the **pace was good**, the examples were very useful, and I especially **enjoyed** the guided meditations. ”

“ The pace was good, and so was the **quality** of the slides. I feel I have been able to **apply the learning** to my personal life and my approach to work. ”

“ The webinars were **well researched** and informative I found the webinars enjoyable to listen to and **calming**. I liked your calm voice and no-nonsense approach, which felt **down to earth** and **realistic**. I looked forward to listening to them and felt a sense of sadness at the end of the programme that there would not be another one. ”



Self-Compassion at Work Programme Support Materials

When asked how useful the participants found the following support materials provided prior to the intervention, respondents reported mean ratings of 5.74 for the information sheet, 5.04 for the reflective daily diary provided with the programme, 5.48 for the key tasks they were required to complete each week and 5.19 for the action plan that was provided with the programme.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding the programme support materials are:

“ **Very easy** to use. ”

“ **Helpful** and **easy to understand** and follow. ”

“ The material was very useful, and I was able to **apply learned knowledge straight away** into my practice. ”

“ The length and style of the materials were **ideal**. ”

“ Key tasks were **excellent** at helping me keep focus on one aspect at a time. Really helped me to **focus**. ”



Self-Compassion at Work Programme Delivery

When asked how satisfied participants were with the online delivery method of the programme, respondents reported a mean rating of 6.06. When asked how satisfied participants were with the four-week timescale in which the programme was delivered, respondents reported a mean rating of 5.48.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding the delivery of the programme are:

“ Overall it was **straightforward** to use. **No problem** to access and **no difficulties** understanding. ”

“ Webinars were **accessible** and a **good method** to deliver this programme. ”

“ The time scale was **acceptable** – time enough to **embed practices** but not too protracted that I got bored. ”

“ **Online delivery** method **excellent**. Ease of use and understanding. **Good time scale**; I would have been daunted to be faced by a longer period, but it was long enough to **embed a daily routine**. ”

“ The online delivery meant it was **easy to do at home**. ”



Self-Compassion at Work Programme Application

In terms of programme application, participants were asked how able they were to apply the learnings from the programme to their daily lives, to respondents reported a mean rating of 5.36.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding the participants' ability to apply the learnings from the programme to their daily lives are:

“ As a direct result of watching the first webinar, **my anxiety levels reduced** a great deal that day and helped me to recognise that I needed to take steps to get on top of my feelings, and **it did not have to lead to going off sick from work**. ”

“ I have found the programme **very useful** and **immediately** put some of the exercises/techniques into **my everyday life**, particularly in the **working environment**. ”

“ During the programme I was **kinder to myself** and better able to **cope with stressful situations at work**. ”

“ I was able to try to **stay calmer** about things which were worrying me about work. I have **intention** and **motivation** through completing the programme and know that **action is key**. I view some colleagues more **positively** now. ”

“ Both at home and at work I have **noticed a difference** in how I react to **my emotions** and have not been overwhelmed by them when I was likely to have been previously. ”



Recommendation of the Self-Compassion at Work Programme to others

Participants were asked if they would recommend this programme to colleagues both within their organisation and in other public sector organisations and **92% of respondents said that they would**.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding recommending this programme to others are:

“ I would **highly recommend** this programme to others. I have learnt a lot about the human experience, and I think that anyone could **benefit** from these teachings. ”

“ I would **definitely recommend** this programme. I think this should be offered to **everyone** as part of an organisation’s responsibility for **employee welfare and wellbeing**. I think it could be used within team supervision to create a **more caring** atmosphere in my place of work and should form part of appraisals. ”

“ Yes absolutely, I think now more than ever with such pressure on employees to always do more for less, **self-compassion should be an absolute priority**. ”

“ Given me ability to **support colleagues better**, which is **vital in team-work**. ”

“ I would indeed! In the climate we work in these days, it is **very important** to think of having **compassion for yourself** as well, since so much is asked of us in relation to colleagues and other service users, that it’s very easy to forget about our own wellbeing. ”

“ Yes **definitely**, it is **excellent**. Clearly a lot of effort has been put into the programme and preparation of the webinars, exercises etc. ”

“ Yes, I would. It has been **valuable** and has provided some **useful tools**. The format of this course was **very flexible** and worked well with having a young family. ”

“ Definitely, yes. It is **well worth the time**. I shall refer to the notes I have made many times, I am sure. ”

Conclusion

The Self-Compassion at Work Programme appeared to be effective in increasing public sector employees' self-compassion and mental wellbeing and decreasing their perceived stress and burnout. This study shows promise that an affordable and scalable intervention can be effective for public sector professionals operating in a significantly challenging environment.

Practitioner Points:

- **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** shows promise as a target intervention in the workplace and should be of interest to **public sector organisations looking to reach a large workforce**
- A four-week online self-guided intervention to develop self-compassion in the workplace may offer a **flexible, effective and cost saving solution to reducing stress and burnout and improving mental wellbeing for staff**
- A **busy working population**, with no previous experience of self-compassion, may find the intervention **accessible and feasible** and provide **very positive** programme evaluations

The Public Sector Self-Compassion at Work Programme has been specifically designed for all staff in this sector and may form part of your organisation's Health and Wellbeing strategy. To view **The Public Sector Self-Compassion at Work Programme** please follow this link:

www.creatingcompassion.com/public-sector-self-compassion-at-work-programme/

As a cost-saving measure, volume licence options are available.

The Compassionate Leadership Coaching Programme we also offer draws on the empirically tested Self-Compassion at Work Programme and is available to individual leaders on our sector specific open programmes, to selected teams or organisation-wide. This programme can be delivered individually or in small groups.

For further information or expressions of interest please contact **Dr Amanda Super** at amanda@creatingcompassion.com



Dr Amanda Super

Qualifications:

Chartered Occupational Psychologist (DOBPsych), MSc in Occupational Psychology, Post Graduate Certificate in Public Sector Leadership, BSc Psychology and Health Science

Professional Memberships:

Chartered Member approved by The British Psychological Society and Registered member of The Health and Care Professions Council.

Relevant Skills and Experience:

Amanda is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist with her own successful consultancy based in the North West of England. She provides best-practice psychological consultancy and executive coaching services to a wide range of clients, with a particular emphasis on healthcare and public sector organisations. Much of her work over the last two decades has been to develop the leadership attributes and skillsets of senior staff within the health and social care sectors, to achieve and fulfil their potential as compassionate leaders of outstanding stature.

Alongside her consultancy work, Amanda is the author of the book, 'A Year of Self-Compassion' which provides the reader with an opportunity to develop their understanding and practice of self-compassion. Amanda was awarded a Professional Doctorate in Occupational and Business Psychology where her thesis focused on developing self-compassion in the workplace. This has ensured that she is engaged in evidence-based practice and is fully conversant with the most current academic research in her field.

Amanda is regularly asked to present at conferences and events throughout the public sector, particularly in relation to developing self-compassion to promote wellbeing at work.

You can follow her on Twitter [@DrAmandaSuper](https://twitter.com/DrAmandaSuper)