

60-minute Compassion Circle Guidance Sheet for Facilitators and Hosts

The purpose of this practice is to provide a space for groups of people to connect, reflect and commit to better care for self and others.

Thank you for downloading this guidance note and script on how to run this Compassion Practice. This one takes an hour; there is also a 20-minute practice if you have less time.

These practices are part of a family of Compassion Practices that have been designed for different situations:

- Individuals, pairs and small groups
- Larger groups of people from across an organisation who don't necessarily know each other
- Teams - groups of people who regularly work together.

These can all be found at [CompassionPractices.net](https://www.compassionpractices.net), along with support on how to use them and inspirations from others who already have. Do take a moment to browse and consider which ones might be most helpful for you.



What is a Compassion Circle?

A Compassion Circle is a facilitated session for groups that provides an opportunity for people to revisit their values and to spend time thinking about how they can take better care of themselves so that in turn they can better care for others. Compassion Circles were originally developed by Andy Bradley, inspired partly by Nancy Kline's insights; their widespread use in Aneurin Bevan University Health Board over the past 5 years as part of a wider employee well-being strategy is one of the most consistent uses of these practices to date. There they are known as Taking Care Giving Care Rounds (TCGC Rounds). This guidance draws heavily on the work of the team behind TCGC Rounds; we are grateful for all their skilled work over the years and their generous sharing of learning, as well as to Andy Bradley and all who worked with him to develop Compassion Circles.

Where do these ideas come from?

Andy Bradley (recognised in 2012 by Nesta as one of Britain's new radical thinkers) has been sharing his work on Compassion Circles for over 10 years. Compassion Circles have been adapted for use in many different contexts. In Aneurin Bevan University Health Board over 1000 healthcare staff have participated over the last 5 years. Compassion Circles have also become an integral part of the Compassionate Mental Health gatherings, were a key foundation for the Kinder Leeds Festival and have spread as far as the Colorado Children's Hospital in the USA.

Our experience as clinicians, team coaches and consultants is that Compassion Practices are helpful to those who use them. They have evaluated very well. We encourage you to try them and see for yourself. Professor Michael West, senior leadership advisor to the NHS, describes these practices as both 'delicate and powerful'.

For more information please go to [CompassionPractices.net](https://www.CompassionPractices.net), where you can find support and resources. There, you can register to receive updates.

If you have found this useful please spread the word by letting people know on social media and pointing them to www.CompassionPractices.net. We'd also greatly appreciate hearing your stories and feedback, possibly to share as inspirations for others. Thank you.

Who can attend a Compassion Circle?

Anyone can attend; they are designed to be inclusive and can include staff at all levels. They can be run in a number of different ways: within a team; in a wider service; at a particular site; or as part of a training course.

Sometimes the people attending will all know each other well, others only a little bit or not at all. How well people know each other might determine which Practice you choose and how you facilitate. At [CompassionPractices.net](https://www.CompassionPractices.net) you will also find two practices aimed specifically at Teams, for 20 and 60 minutes respectively. In these Team practices, the emphasis is on team oneness and compassion as well as on individual self-care.

Inclusion

Compassion Practices have been designed for everyone to benefit from. They offer a human experience, for all. When planning to run them, please think about who might not normally be invited into support spaces and ensure that no one is left out, using any invitational wording/marketing to make this clear. Take time to learn about cultural differences, and cultural appropriateness. Think too about accessibility and learn about social disability. Compassion Practices can be wonderfully inclusive places to share space and learn about other experiences, and they shouldn't ever create further division between people. If you formally evaluate people's experience of taking part, do remember to consider checking on these considerations

Is it a one-off session?

Compassion Practices have been used as one-off sessions and have been repeated with the same group of attendees. How often they are repeated will depend on the wishes of the attendees; for example they could be repeated every month, a few times a year or at an annual 'away day'. They can be offered at a particular site or within a service on a regular basis with different staff attending each time. They have been developed to allow them to be implemented flexibly across the organisation. The majority of rounds at ABUHB have been run on a one-off basis in team meetings, training days or 'away days'.

How long should a Compassion Circle last?

The Round should last for one hour, although it probably makes sense to allow an hour and a quarter for larger or more vocal groups. You will need to be strict with time-keeping to ensure that there is enough time to get through all the exercises within the hour; we have found that it is this structure and discipline that paradoxically liberates the safety and compassion.

How many people can attend?

Ideally a Compassion Circle should include between 6 and 12 attendees. We recommend 8 as the ideal to allow for a good combination of a diversity of contributions, along with time for each individual to have their say. Groups can be larger than this, but you will need to be extra vigilant with time-keeping. With larger groups, consider running parallel rounds if enough facilitators are available. If this is not possible, you will either need to allow longer or reduce the amount of time for individual contributions, which is possible but not ideal.

Where should a Compassion Circle take place?

It is important that people feel safe and comfortable when they attend a Compassion Circle, so try to use a suitable room. It will need to be a private

space to ensure confidentiality, there will need to be enough chairs for all and space to sit together in a circle. Ideally there should be some refreshments available – water at the very least.

Who can run these sessions?

It is best if at least one of the people holding the space has some experience as a coach, facilitator or psychologist, as well as working with feelings. You may well have people with these skills in your team – sometimes hidden! WE highly recommend that you have an experience of a Compassion Circle before seeking to facilitate one; the website CompassionPractices.net also has key information on the principles behind the practices as well as other background, resources and inspirations that will all help you to prepare.

Our experience is that committing to the designed structure of each practice plays a key part in making the space feeling safe and enabling. It helps to involve everyone and avoids a few voices dominating. It also helps the facilitator to feel that they don't need to do a large amount of preparation.

What does the facilitator do during a Compassion Circle?

The facilitator starts by giving a brief introduction (see the full script that follows) and 'contract' with everyone that the session is confidential. They should encourage attendees to be concise and succinct when it is their turn to talk, and to be 'present in listening' when they are not speaking. The facilitator should introduce the host (when there is one) and explain their role; particularly that they can, if desired, take anonymised notes of the group discussions which will be sent round afterwards as a reminder of the round. The main role of the facilitator is to lead the group rounds and pair exercises (see format below) and to keep time when there is not a host. Participants should be reassured that in the whole-group rounds it is always ok to pass and that they will be returned to and given the option to contribute at the end of the round.

The facilitator should respond evenly to all contributions with warmth, reminding participants regularly that it is ok to pass. Learning participants' names is helpful (though not essential) and making a mental note of where the group rounds start (which will be different each time) is vital so that no one is missed. The facilitator can participate in all whole-group rounds, but like any participant, can pass if they need to.

Bring your authentic self to your facilitation – feel free to add bits of gentle humour or humanity, always mindful of the aim to create a safe, compassionate, enabling atmosphere.

What does the host need to do?

The host should welcome people as they arrive and offer them refreshments. During the Circle, the host can, if agreed, make anonymised notes of the group discussions (not the discussions in pairs) and write these up to send to the group. The host will also act as time keeper. If there is an uneven number of people, the host will need to join someone to form a pair for the pair exercises (and then the time keeping role should pass to the facilitator).

Rounds have been run without a host by more experienced facilitators. In that scenario, the note keeping may not take place, making it especially helpful to use the evaluation questionnaire at the end of the round to ensure that information is collected on the Circle's impact. Facilitators can take part in pairs thinking when there is an odd number of participants, though you will need to balance timing and participation carefully.

Timekeeping

You will explain at the outset that this method allows for equal contributions from everyone, both in the pairs and in the rounds. The pairs work should be strictly timed so that each person has an equal amount of time to talk and listen in their pair. In the whole-group exercises, you will give people a rough guidance on how long you would like each contribution to be; usually 30-60 seconds, depending on how many people are in the group. Everyone speaks in turn. If a facilitator feels that contributions are too lengthy, they should try to make expectations about brevity clear, ideally before the next group round so that the message can be given generally to everyone rather than someone being singled out. Sometimes the facilitator might indicate when a long contribution has been made that more brevity is needed, trying to balance warmth and appreciation with the needs of the format (for example – “Thanks for your contribution. I’m aware that we probably need future contributions to be a bit more concise, (though I know it’s not always easy) if we’re going to keep to time”).

You should time the pairs work, ideally with an alarm that is audible to the group. The whole-group rounds do not need to be timed, though rough indications are offered as a guide and if you have an unruly group or one or two enthusiastic talkers (!) you can set your timer for 30 or 60 seconds for each contribution until people get the hang of this different style of having a meeting.

What happens if someone's late?

Compassion Practices are time-focused in their design, and sticking to structure is key, so our experience has been that it's important to start on time. It's also important to recognise that people might not be able to be exactly on time for all kinds of reasons, so a generous spirit and some facilitation skill is important both to start on time, and to leave space for people to arrive late and feel welcome. If running a larger group or team Compassion Practice, the host is advised to form part of the pairs if there is an odd number but if someone arrives late, they can take the host's place in that pair at the start of the next round, when they've had the instructions. If using larger Compassion Practices virtually, the host may also acknowledge and welcome latecomers in the 'chat room' of the chosen platform.

What happens if someone cries?

It is important that people using Compassion Practices can bring their whole selves to the experience; feelings are inevitable so make them welcome. People may cry because they feel upset, or simply as a release for long-held emotions. People may also laugh and feel joyous. Facilitators, and those who take part, should be prepared to witness these feelings in themselves and others. The facilitator's role is to create safety to hold a wide range of emotions, and to bring a willingness to support any emotional needs that arise; be human but adult; avoid 'rescuing'. Be ready to meaningfully signpost supportive services if necessary.

What if someone dominates the space?

This should not happen if you commit to the structure; this is key to signalling that everyone has equal opportunity to participate, and ensures that nobody can dominate. If people jump in out of turn, they should be kindly told that the structure is different to normal discussion and that everyone has their turn. This itself can have a profound effect on the culture of teams. This is fondly known as 'fierce facilitation' and the recommended timer/stopwatch really helps with this.

Our experience is that this fierce time management method quickly sets the tone for listening and respect for equal 'airtime'.

Who looks after the facilitators?

The facilitator and host should make time to debrief afterwards, even if only quickly. We will be offering online spaces for facilitators to share their experiences, reflect and learn from others – see [CompassionPractices.net](https://www.compassionpractices.net).

Can I just get on with it?

Yes. Our experience suggests that confidence grows by using the practices. However, if completely new to Compassion Practices we ideally recommend taking part in one first. You can do this by checking on [CompassionPractices.net](https://www.compassionpractices.net) to see if any practice experiences are available, and you may also wish to try #5minMeSpace by yourself, or with another person of your choosing, to experience a sense of the work.

It can also be helpful to start using Compassion Practices with close colleagues to build your own confidence, before expanding your practice. Once confident and ready to promote the practices or connect with others, you can use word of mouth to build momentum; this has worked well elsewhere. Remember, [CompassionPractices.net](https://www.compassionpractices.net) has been established to help new people find the practices, gain confidence, connect with others and get started. Experience tells us that taking time to do this benefits both facilitators and those taking part.

60-minute Compassion Circle: Script

In the following script, "things in quotation marks such as these" are for you to say to the group, whilst [things in square brackets] are instructions and reminders for you, the facilitator.

Ask people to turn their mobile phones to silent where possible; the hope is that the hour can be uninterrupted

● **Welcome and brief introduction** *[about 5 minutes]*

“Welcome everyone. This is an opportunity to think about the flow of compassion: compassion we give to ourselves, compassion we receive from others and compassion we give to others. The Round will be a mixture of pairs work and work in the circle. I’ll be asking a series of questions and inviting you to share your thoughts. The round should take an hour and I’ll be keeping an eye on the time.”

“When we are in the circle, I’d like to ask you to do two main things: firstly, a key part of compassion is the ability to listen really beautifully to others. We invite you to try to listen as attentively as possible – it’s common to get caught up in planning your own contribution when people take turns around the circle, but try to be present with what is being said, trusting that you’ll know what to say when it’s your turn. Secondly, I’d like to ask you to keep your contributions succinct so that everyone has an equal chance to contribute. When you are working in pairs you will have equal time to think and listen to each other. ”

“Look after yourselves and do what you need to do – if you need to leave at any point, please do, and in the circle work it is always fine to pass. Only share what you feel comfortable to share. It is important that people feel safe to contribute what is on their mind, so can we please agree that this is a confidential space; what happens here stays here; please raise your hand to indicate that you commit to this.”

Optional grounding exercise:

[It is common for people to feel anxious at the beginning, particularly when the facilitator is unknown to them. The experience of sitting in a circle might be unfamiliar and generate a sense of threat. This often dissipates with the first round, and the facilitator may choose to move straight into this round depending on the context.]

“Thank you for taking time out of your busy lives to be here. We often talk about our feet not touching the ground, or not having time to take a breath. We hope this will be an opportunity to have a moment’s pause – a bit of breathing space in all that busyness. To start with, we’d like you to close your eyes for a moment or lower your gaze. Becoming aware of the ground under your feet. Feeling the seat of your chair supporting you. Taking a couple of deep breaths and noticing that you have a moment to slow down. [Allow a pause for a couple of breaths]. Thank you, and come back when you are ready”

● **Round 1: Entering an appreciative frame of mind** *[about 5 Minutes]*

“Research tells us that people think better when they are in a positive or appreciative frame of mind. In this round we’re inviting you to share one thing that is going well for you at work at the moment, and one thing that is going well for you outside work [If you want a short cut, just use one of these].

“You might find that many of the challenging things you’re experiencing come to mind, so it might be hard to find something positive. It doesn’t matter how small the positive is – even being here might be an achievement, or something nice in your life that you take for granted; always feel free to pass. Try to be specific in your response about something that is going well.

“If you can start by saying your first name that would be helpful.” [We deliberately do not ask for people’s job roles, to increase the sense of connecting on a human level].

“When someone is ready to begin, please do, then we’ll go round to the left” [do this for all group exercises].

[Thank people calmly and evenly as they contribute; it can be helpful to use exactly the same words].

[At the end of the round]: “Thank you, now we are going to have a short round on the values that unite us”.

● **Round 2: Uniting values** *[about 5 minutes]*

“Please close your eyes or lower your gaze. This is a visualisation exercise. Imagine a time in the future when you might be unwell or vulnerable and in need of care, perhaps from the service you’re involved in. You’re sitting in a different chair to this one, perhaps by a bed [adapt the image to the service setting as needed]. A member of staff is walking towards you and as you see them approach you think with relief “I’m going to be alright with this one”.

● **Round 3: Undivided listening** [about 12 minutes in total]

“Thank you everyone. In this stage of the round, we invite you to think about how you take care of yourselves. Self-care might mean looking after ourselves physically, but it might also be our social and emotional self-care. We would like you to work in pairs. If you feel comfortable, maybe choose someone you don’t already know so that you get to meet someone new”.

[If there is an odd number, the host can make up a pair, and if no host, the facilitator].

“Each of you will get a turn to be the thinker and to be the listener. Briefly take a moment to find out or remind each other of your names and decide who will think first and who will listen first.

[This should take no more than 10 seconds – you might want to ask the thinkers to raise their hands to make sure each pair is clear.]

“Listeners, it is your role to listen without interrupting, with undivided attention and listening for things you appreciate about your thinking partner. Resist the urge to chip in as you might in a normal conversation – you may hear things that you recognise – but your role is simply to create the space for your partner to think. If your partner seems to run out of things to say you can prompt them with – “and what else?”

“Thinkers – you have 3 minutes to consider your self-care. If you run out of things to say (and you might be surprised at how long 3 minutes feels) don’t feel you have to keep talking. Just take the time to keep thinking.

“Listeners – we know that it helps people to hear their name, so say your partner’s name and “What can you do to take better care of yourself?”

[You can shorten this to 2 minutes each if you have a bigger group].

[Time the 3 or 2 minutes, and when the first 3 minutes is up, ask people to swap over so “the Thinker becomes the Listener and vice versa”. Remind them of the instructions if you feel you need to.]

Swapping Appreciations

“So now we are going to swap some appreciations. We asked you to listen out for things that you appreciate about what your partner what was saying, so now is your chance to share that with them. We don’t often take the time to appreciate others but as the saying goes, ‘Thinking something good about someone and not saying it, is like wrapping a present but not giving it! The author Nancy Kline says that there are 3 S’s of good appreciation: Be Sincere, be Specific and be Succinct – so give yourself a little moment to tune into those three S’s before giving your appreciation.

So in your pairs... take *30 seconds* each to say to one another:

“Your partner’s name + What I appreciate about what you said is...”

[Host to time *2 x 30 seconds*, maybe signalling halfway through that it’s time to swap over]

“Thank you everyone” [You may find quite a big buzz in the room; you may find it hard to get people’s attention back; maybe make some gentle, positive, or humorous comment about this in a way that feels natural to you, such as “Well, that certainly created a buzz”].

Round: Committing to self-care

“Coming back into the larger group, we invite you to make a commitment to a change you might want to make – research shows that committing to a change publicly makes it more likely to happen. As always, feel free to pass and please keep it succinct so that everyone has the chance to contribute equally. So what changes are you interested in making in the way that you care for yourself?

[Again thank people evenly for their contribution and then at the end say:]

“Thank you everyone”.

● **Round 4: : Inhibitors to compassion** [about 16 minutes]

“In thinking about the flow of compassion, we’ve thought about the values that really matter in our service with our visualisation, and about how we might show more compassion for ourselves in our self-care. We would now like to consider the inhibitors to compassion in our services – what gets in the way. We will start with a round where we can each share our first thought on this question.”

“Please share briefly your first thought about what gets in the way of compassion. As before starting anywhere in the circle and going around to the left.

[In a larger group you can consider making this a pop-up round – inviting contributions from anywhere in the circle for 3-5 minutes].

“So that first round is useful as it inevitably broadens our thinking when we hear other people’s views. Now we would like to do Pairs thinking on the same question. If you feel comfortable doing so, please could you divide into new pairs, making sure you know each other’s name and decide who will think and listen first.”

[Once new pairs have formed:]

“Thank you. In your pairs, please continue discussing this topic for 3 minutes each, with each person bringing their experience from their setting. I’ll let you know when to swap listener and thinker roles. Remember, if you are the listener, please say your partner’s name then ask the question: What gets in the way of compassion?” and listen without interrupting, listening for things you appreciate about your partner”.

[Remember to time the 3 minutes and give the instruction to swap over when the time comes].

Appreciations round

“Thank you everyone. Now I’d like to ask you to swap some appreciations with your new partner, bearing in mind the 3 S’s of good appreciation: Be sincere, specific and succinct. You have about 30 seconds each. Just take a little minute to gather your thoughts before offering your appreciation.”
[Allow 30 seconds, ask people to swap over and then call time after a minute].

Round: Your Thinking Now

“Thank you everyone. So your thinking will probably be evolving as you have these different opportunities to think and listen about our question of “What gets in the way of compassion”. I’d now like to ask you to come back together as a wider group and share your thinking now about what gets in the way of compassion in our team / service / hospital”

[Thank people evenly as they make their contribution; you might want to capture the thinking, with consent].

[In a larger group you can consider making this a pop-up round – inviting contributions from anywhere in the circle, for 3-5 minutes]

“Thank you everyone, I hope you found that interesting and useful – I certainly did” [or your own words to that effect]

● **Round 5: Enablers to compassion**

“We would now like to consider What sustains and supports compassion? What enables compassion to really embed itself in our teams and services? Staying in your pairs, please take three minutes each to focus on this question.

[If you have time, you can do this using the full method of: First thought; Pairs for 3 minutes each; Thinking Now round. Don't forget to time the pairs, remind people about succinct speaking and exquisite listening in the rounds, and gently encourage people to be succinct if they are speaking for longer than 30 seconds in the rounds. It is much better to have brief contributions from everyone than a few longer contributions as this helps to bring in a diversity of thinking and it also sends the signal that everyone's thinking is valued. Again the host can take notes if this has been agreed with the group.]

● **Round 6: Evaluation and appreciation**

"Thank you everyone, we are now coming towards the end of this Compassion Circle. We are going to have one more round where I'm going to ask you to share three things: A final thought, an appreciation for the meeting, and an appreciation for your latest thinking partner. Please bear in mind the 3 S's."

[It can be fun to see if the group remember what the 3 S's are at this point, as a way to reinforce the learning; we've seen many times how learning to listening and learning to offer and receive appreciations can have profound effects on group dynamics and people's personal lives after just one such session, so it is good to gently repeat these aspects of the method during one Compassion Circle so people can 'relax into the structure' as the methods become more familiar. It is also sometimes very powerful offering people a chance to appreciate the meeting and their thinking partner in public.]

"As before, starting anywhere in the circle and going around to the left."
[You may have to repeat the instructions: A final thought, an appreciation for the meeting, and an appreciation for your latest thinking partner.]

Closing remarks

Thank you everyone for taking part and for your contributions. Does everyone have a copy of the evaluation sheet? We would really appreciate it if you could complete this before you leave"

[If relevant, clarify arrangements for host sharing notes. If anyone does not wish their comments to appear in the record that will be shared with the group, they should let the host know.

Invite people to consider whether they want to use any of the practices in other parts of their work settings, for example sharing something that's going well at the beginning of their team meetings. There may be other ways of taking the work forward, such as checking in with each other about self-care.

● **FOLLOW-UP**

What happens after a Round?

After the Round, the host should, where relevant, type up anonymised notes of the group discussion and email these out to all participants. The host should explain that we might use some of the anonymous notes to form part of our review of Compassion Circles to keep improving them. If anyone does not wish their comments to be included in any evaluation, they will need to let the host know. Where an evaluation form is used, these will be stored anonymously.

Are we evaluating the Rounds?

Yes, we would like to find out whether people enjoyed the Rounds, whether they found them beneficial and also whether anything could be improved. We ask participants to complete a short evaluation questionnaire after the Round and these are collated for analysis (see the evaluation form below). We would really welcome hearing how many people attended, receiving the evaluation forms and, with the permission of attendees, anonymised notes so that key themes can be analysed.

We also encourage facilitators (and hosts) to reflect on how the session went and whether there is anything that we could improve; a Facilitator Reflection form is included at the end of this guidance.

Credit

This Guidance document is heavily based on guidance written by the following team at Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, to whom we would like to express our sincere thanks and respect for a job well done:

- Rachel Potter (Consultant Clinical Psychologist, LD service)
- Benna Waites (Joint Head of Psychology, Counselling and Arts Therapies)
- Sarah Flowers (Head of Clinical Health Psychology)
- Catherine Bradfield (Senior Clinical Psychologist, Adult Mental Health)
- Adrian Neal, (Head of Employee Well-Being)
- Jane Simmons (Clinical Psychologist, Adult Mental Health)
- Natalie Stott (Trainee Clinical Psychologist) - July 2019.

The final edit of this guidance note was carried out by Alister Scott, co-founder of CompassionPractices.net, in March 2021

Compassion Circles Feedback

Please take a minute to answer these questions. We will use your responses to develop Compassion Practices for the benefit of all.

Date of round:	
Job title (optional):	
Area of work / service / department (optional):	

Please rate your experience of today's Compassion Circle (Circle your response)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Exceptional
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Please respond by circling the box that most reflects your opinion	Completely Disagree	Disagree somewhat	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree somewhat	Completely agree
Today's event has increased my awareness of compassion towards patients	1	2	3	4	5
Today's event will help me work better with my colleagues	1	2	3	4	5
Today's event has increased my awareness of compassion towards myself	1	2	3	4	5
Reflecting on how I can improve my self-care was useful to me	1	2	3	4	5
Today's round has helped me think about ways I could embed compassion in the service I work in	1	2	3	4	5
I would like to attend a Compassion Circle again	1	2	3	4	5
I would recommend Compassion Circles to colleagues	1	2	3	4	5

What did you like about the Compassion Circle?	
What did you find difficult, if anything?	
Is there anything we could do to improve the Compassion Circles method?	