

# FOOD *for* THOUGHT

WINTER 2015

# Self-Compassion

## Nourishing the Heart

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## About The Center for Mindful Eating:

### Our Mission:

The mission of The Center for Mindful Eating, also known as TCME, is to help people achieve a balanced, respectful, healthy and joyful relationship with food and eating. By providing an easily accessible source of information and opportunities to interact via the web and in other ways, we seek to train and encourage professionals who can then foster this capacity in others.

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## Board Members Corner: A New Year for TCME



**Lilia Graue**  
*MD, MFT*

The new year is upon us, and with it, many exciting developments at TCME. Our membership has grown exponentially during 2014, and we have gone global! We have created a section of Spanish resources, including a Spanish version of Food for Thought.

In response to requests from our members, we are now offering a wider array of member benefits, including webinars, which provide a more interactive platform with inspiring learning opportunities, and a new CPE section!

Throughout the past year, we have witnessed lively conversation and debate across different forums and social networks regarding mindfulness, mindful eating, the role of meditation, healthy

weight and weight loss, healthy eating, the new food/nutrition movement, and sustainability, among other topics.

With so much information available through different sources, we consider it essential to get across a clear message of what our collective wisdom understands as mindful eating and related relevant topics affecting the practice of mindful eating for our growing community. With this purpose, throughout 2015, TCME will publish position statements that are true to our mission, vision and values, and to the Principles of Mindful Eating. Each position statement will provide references that can be used for more in-depth reading. Our hope is that position statements will provide the spark for meaningful reflections and conversations along the path to a healthy and joyful relationship with food and eating for the benefit of all beings.

**Lilia Graue, MD, MFT**  
*Vice President TCME Board of Directors*



*For this issue, we asked our members, 'What obstacles arise as you try to practice self-compassion?'*

"Moments of personal unawareness; anxiety; being too much in a hurry; temporarily losing connection with my innate nature of joy and well-being."

-Kati Konersman, MS (Dallas, Texas)

"The little voice of self-criticism can ask: 'Do you really deserve so much attention? Do you really have time for THAT?'"

-Géraldine Desindes (Paris, France)

See more member insights on self-compassion on page 8: Community Wisdom





# Food, Nourishment and the Need for

# Self-Compassion



**Caroline Baerten**

RD

**F**rom recent scientific studies, we understand better how a compassionate mind influences our brains, bodies, and the way we relate to ourselves and others.

But it is also true that we live in an environment that makes compassion a challenge to cultivate.

It is a society of competition, comparison and (self) criticism, especially the sad habit of blaming people if they don't meet certain standards or act or look in a prescribed way.

As Dr. Ken Goss, a researcher in the United Kingdom, says: "It is not our fault that so many of us struggle to regulate our eating behavior and weight. We are species on a long evolutionary journey, and our brains are developed to survive for times of scarcity."

Our brains have evolved to be attracted to foods that are high in fat and sugar, and our bodies prefer to store

excess energy for leaner times. From an evolutionary perspective, our brains are not really designed to regulate our eating by restrictive dieting. Two million years ago, our ancestors didn't need to restrain themselves, so we still have the conditioned tendency to "see food and eat it."

Finally, being fed has always been a comforting experience for humans. The natural preference for sweet foods and the behavioral link between sweet foods and rewards as a child create an emotional bond, even later as an adult.

It is important to have compassion for the complexity of our relationship with food, eating and weight. If we are kind about the pain that can be hidden behind the "food problem," we have a better chance of working with these issues. The moment our patients stop blaming themselves for their eating behavior and their weight, they will feel less ashamed and more open to find other ways that may help them to find balance. Many diets contain the hidden message that having a weight problem means something is wrong with you. No wonder people feel stigmatized. Also, this is a challenge for health professionals who are educated to focus on weight and use

*continued on page 4*

## self-compassion

*Continued from Page 3*

interventions that are often guilt- and shame-based.

## Managing distress compassionately

The key message is that overeating or disordered eating is not our fault, but we can take responsibility for it if we are supportive and kind to ourselves along the way. We need to focus more on health and well-being and less on the feeling of success associated by the numbers on the scale.

### **This means learning:**

- To regulate eating in a way that listens to the body's needs and general well-being.
- To be able to accept that there are normal variations in shape and that health at every size is possible.
- To be able to accept human beings in a nonjudgmental way regardless of their weight and shape.
- To be able to manage feelings without using food as the only way of coping with distress.

This way food is put back in its place as something joyful to be shared with others and is no longer perceived as a threat.

## Understanding our emotional system

In the research of Dr. Paul Gilbert of the United Kingdom, he outlines how at least three types of emotional systems have evolved in humans:

Threat system is linked with the oldest part of the brain. It involves emotions like anger, fear, anxiety and disgust. The automatic response is fight, flight or freeze.

Drive system is linked to achieve something (food, feelings of pleasure).

Soothing system is associated with calm and contentment, safety,



"A compassionate mind influences our brains, body, and the way we relate to ourselves and others."

Caroline Baerten, RD  
Food for Thought  
Winter 2015



compassion, and feeling soothed through the connection with others.

One of the reasons human beings soothe themselves with particularly sweet and fat foods is that it can be difficult to reach out to others and deal with complex emotions in an open way (often linked with shame).

## Food and nourishment: a need for self-compassion

Scientists like K. Neff, P. Gilbert and K. Goss, who have done research on self-compassion, distinguish different ways to activate the soothing system:

Compassionate thinking is never critical. It focuses on understanding that the biological reactions around eating gave us evolutionary advantage. It means accepting that all human beings experience reactive pattern to a certain degree. Nonjudgmental thinking means letting go of that angry desire to attack and to condemn.

Compassionate behavior is about gently encouraging ourselves to take actions that are in our and others' long-term best interests, even if they are unpleasant in the short term.

Compassionate feelings are linked to kindness, warmth, support and belonging.

Compassionate intentions mean tolerating and no longer avoiding distress. It embraces difficult experiences

in a warm, empathic way.

## A new approach to disordered eating

For years, certain foods can be threats and losing weight can become an achievement that gives only good feelings when in control. Eating can be a source of comfort, a way of rebelling against constraints and rules, or even a way of punishing ourselves.

Developing a compassionate mind approach can help to deal with all these mind-sets that create problematic relationships with food and the body.

A "compassionate self" knows that we had no choice over the design of the body and brain, or over the life into which we were born. So there is no point in blaming ourselves for things over which we as humans have had no control. Letting go of the deep-rooted, shame-based self-criticism – with associated emotions from the threat system such as anger and fear – is the first step. Compassionate self-correction focuses on the real desire to improve as best we can, using the brain and body we inherited over millions of years and the experiences of life we gathered. It is only this way we can live a more caring, open-hearted and supportive life, with the compassionate wisdom that change is often a difficult and long-term process.

*Caroline Baerten (Belgium) is a mindfulness-based dietitian/RD, qualified chef and integrative psychotherapist (i.t) specializing in work with disturbed eating behavior, weight issues and sustainability. She is a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teacher with the Center for Mindfulness, UMass Medical School (USA). She serves on the TCME Board. She welcomes comments to this article and can be reached at [info@me-nu.org](mailto:info@me-nu.org)*



# Practice suggestions for a self-compassion approach



Lilia Graue

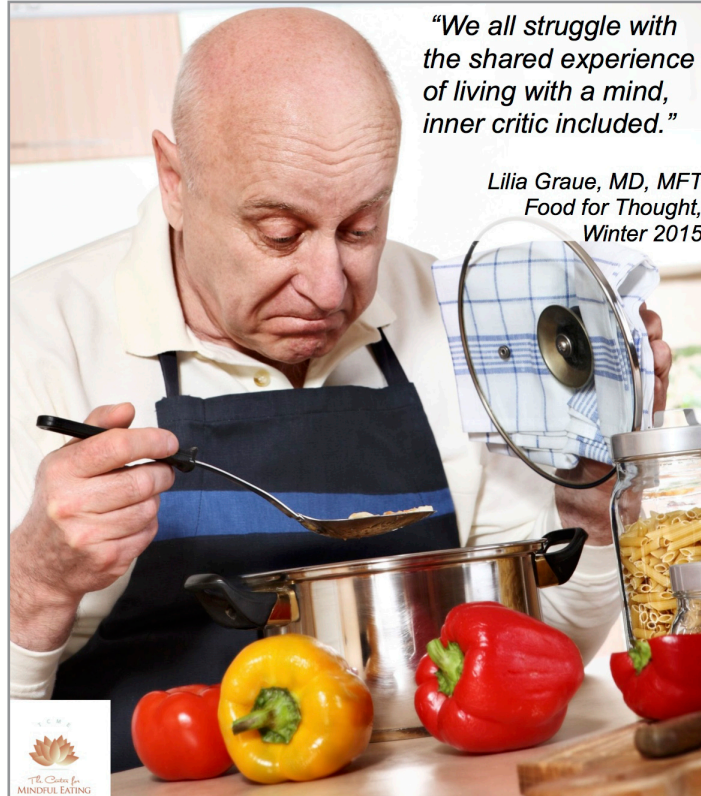
MD, MFT

A few days ago, as I led a mindful eating retreat, many of the participants were struggling with self-talk around whether they were meditating “well” or achieving the “right” way to eat mindfully. I chose to address this through an explicit practice of loving kindness and compassion.

For my own practice, cultivating self-compassion has been essential. It is only through it that I’ve been able to relate to my mind and heart hunger in a way that has allowed me to truly nurture my body mindfully.

Throughout medical school, and then postgraduate training in fields related to nutrition, obesity and healthy eating, my mind was filled with information about healthy vs. unhealthy foods, healthy vs. unhealthy eating patterns. And for years, I found myself struggling around meals and often feeling unsatisfied because I was, most of the time, attempting to feed my mind hunger, responding to the should’s and shouldn’t’s, and sadly, and paradoxically, not truly nurturing my body, let alone my heart. As health professionals, we can be easily trapped in an intellectualization of what mindfulness, and mindful eating, for that matter, should be like. This can be a significant obstacle in helping our patients or clients establish their own mindful eating practice.

As Marsha Hudnall shares in the patient handout in this issue of FFT, Kristin Neff defines self-compassion as having three elements: self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness.



*“We all struggle with the shared experience of living with a mind, inner critic included.”*

Lilia Graue, MD, MFT  
Food for Thought,  
Winter 2015

In sitting with a person struggling with her eating, particularly with self-talk around meals, I find it useful to bring all of these components into the clinical setting. Common humanity reminds us that whether we are sitting in the “professional” chair or on the other side, we all struggle with the shared experience of living with a mind, inner critic included. We all face mind hunger, heart hunger and body hunger. Mindfulness allows us to become aware of these hungers and to observe them and relate to them with curiosity. It also allows us to notice the self-talk that arises. Kindness toward this experience, and to the self-talk itself, nurtures the heart and opens up a space from which to respond skillfully to all of these hungers.

As professionals, it is useful to ask ourselves some questions: How do

I respond to my inner critic? How do I relate to my mind hunger, to my heart hunger, to my body hunger? Am I able to approach these experiences with self-compassion? How can I share this practice with others?

Loving kindness and compassion allow us to listen empathetically, to create a spaciousness for the individuals seeking our expertise so

that they can listen to their own inner wisdom and establish a mindful eating practice that best suits their needs.

## Suggested readings:

Altman, Donald, Ronna Kabatznick, and Char Wilkins. *“Compassion.”* Food for Thought, The Center for Mindful Eating: Oct. 2012

Fain, Jean. *The Self-compassion Diet: A Step-by-step Program to Lose Weight with Loving-kindness.* Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2011. Print.

Germer, Christopher K. *The Mindful Path to Self-compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions.* New York: Guilford, 2009.

Neff, Kristen. *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself.* N.p.: William Morrow, 2011.

*Lilia Graue, MD, MFT, is a mindfulness-based psychotherapist, specializing in disturbed eating behavior, depression and anxiety. She leads workshops and retreats in mindful eating, MBCT and MBSR. She serves as Vice President of TCME. [www.mindfuleatingmexico.com](http://www.mindfuleatingmexico.com)*



# Mindful Eating in Europe

*TCME board members Caroline Baerten (RD, Belgium) and Cinzia Pezzolesi (DPsy, PhD, Italy) talk about mindful eating in Europe.*

The mindful eating movement started in Europe in 2009 when the first professional mindful eating training (MB-EAT) was offered by Jean Kristeller and Char Wilkins. Caroline Baerten (RD, Belgium) attended the training and adapted the MB-EAT curriculum to the European lifestyle. Since then, hundreds of lectures, workshops and trainings on mindful eating have been offered to the general public.

In 2010, Caroline founded MeNu. Centre for Mindful eating & Nutrition, a network and resource for health care professionals and mindfulness trainers interested in mindful eating. Through MeNu, more than 50 professionals from 16 countries have been trained as mindful eating teachers. MeNu annually organizes professional trainings in Belgium that take place in ancient castles or medieval monasteries.

Caroline started a knowledge platform where the main focus involves informing and training mindful eating teachers in Europe.

In 2013, the first Mindful Eating, Conscious Living Foundational Training was organized in Europe (Belgium) and facilitated by Jan Chozen Bays and Char Wilkins. In 2014, Jean Kristeller and Andrea Lieberstein were invited to teach the professional MB-EAT training.

In the United Kingdom, Cinzia Pezzolesi (DPsy, PhD) has been working closely with The Mindfulness Project, a nonprofit with a vision to create an innovative platform for sharing mindfulness with as many people as possible. By offering a secular, evidence-based approach, the project hopes to make

mindfulness meditation more accessible and relatable to a mainstream audience while keeping it real and meaningful. The project offers mindful eating courses to the general public based on the MB-EAT program. It works to help people replace self-criticism with self-nourishment.

Cinzia has been cultivating fruitful collaborations with the Universities of Bologna and Padova in Italy, where they have introduced a series of lectures in psychotherapy schools to promote the use of mindful eating in psychotherapy. The British Association of Applied Nutrition (BANT) has approached The Mindfulness Project to promote mindful eating to nutritionists. They are planning a conference in February with the theme of “Health at every size and mindful eating.”

Caroline describes how mindful eating is different in Europe. “Here we have a strong culinary tradition and a lifestyle that is different from the U.S. and Latin America. Obesity is less of a social health problem compared with other countries in the world.”

The professional trainings in Europe have focused on pleasure in food, sustainability, body awareness and compassion as more important values compared to weight, stress or body size, which seem more prominent in the United States and Latin America.

**Here we have a strong culinary tradition and a lifestyle that is different from the U.S. and Latin America.**



# Self-Compassion: The Often Missing Ingredient in Healthy Eating



**Marsha Hudnall**

MS, RDN, CD

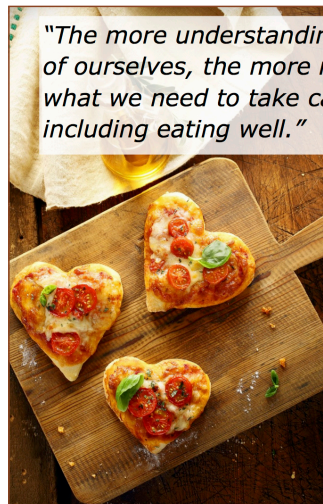
During another tough day at work, Mary realizes she forgot to eat lunch. She's starving. The salad she brought that day doesn't appeal, especially when her office mate offers to share the pizza he ordered. Mary loves pizza so she takes a piece, eating it quickly because she is hungry but also feeling guilty over her choice. She takes another slice. And another. She finishes the meal feeling too full and starts berating herself for her lack of willpower. "I shouldn't have eaten that. What's wrong with me? Why do I always choose foods that I know I shouldn't eat?"

Does this scenario sound familiar? It's one that's repeated frequently by many who repeatedly try without success to eat more healthfully. What they don't realize is that they're missing a key ingredient in healthy eating. It's self-compassion. And it has the power to make or break your success at eating well.

## Self-Compassion Defined

According to researcher Kristin Neff, PhD, self-compassion consists of three main components:

- **Self-kindness** – Being kind and understanding toward yourself in instances of pain or failure as opposed to



*"The more understanding and forgiving we are of ourselves, the more motivated we are to do what we need to take care of ourselves, including eating well."*

Marsha Hudnall, MS, RDN, CD  
Food for Thought, Winter 2015



harshly criticizing yourself.

- **Common humanity** – Recognizing your experiences are part of the larger human experience. You are not alone.
- **Mindfulness** – Holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than overidentifying with them or trying to ignore them.

Research shows the more understanding and forgiving we are of ourselves, the more motivated we are to do what we need to take care of ourselves, including eating well. It also helps guard against emotional overeating, which often occurs when we feel as if we have failed in our efforts to eat well.

A lack of self-compassion closes the door to learning about our habits, patterns, triggers and needs when it comes to food. By adopting a forgiving and curious attitude instead, you can foster a healthy relationship with eating and food and yourself that can open the door to improved health and happiness.

*Marsha Hudnall, MS, RDN, CD, is a TCME board member and co-owner of Green Mountain at Fox Run, a women's healthy weight center offering an alternative to dieting since 1973.*

## How to Add a Healthy Dose of Self-Compassion to Your Meals

**Step 1:** Give up black-and-white thinking. Embrace the fact that healthy eating is flexible and can include a wide variety of foods, some of which are richer than others, such as a pizza. And sometimes the healthier choice may be the richer choice.

For example, which would be a healthier choice at a party: Pizza or salad? The salad is only healthier if that's what you really want. Otherwise, you might feel deprived and end up overeating later. Enjoying pizza mindfully as part of a celebration allows for the many roles that food plays in our lives. We can often end up feeling satisfied with less when it does.

**Step 2:** Become aware of how you talk to yourself when eating. Does a tape start running in your head that admonishes you not to eat too much or not to eat certain types of foods? Or that you're a failure if you do? Write down what you say to yourself.

**Step 3:** Write down responses to those thoughts that you can "turn on" when you hear yourself starting to go down the familiar road of negative self-talk.

**Step 4:** Practice those responses every time you hear yourself talking negatively to yourself about your eating. Try carrying around a small notebook with your new messages to refer to. Remember, the first time you do something differently is the hardest. Every time you do it thereafter, it gets easier.

# COMMUNITY WISDOM:

We asked our members to share their experiences, challenges and insights on the theme of self-compassion - both professionally and personally:

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## What obstacles arise as you try to practice self-compassion?

“Doubt arises, as if compassion to myself might hinder me back from attaining my objectives.” ~ *Ainhoa Campo, ICF and Newfield Certified Coach (Pamplona Area, Spain)*

“As the pace of life gets more and more fast, sometimes I forget about myself as a being and enter in this automatic mode, a mode that is aggressive against myself. I need to ‘come back to me’ to have more self-compassion.” ~ *Claudia Correia, Dietitian (Singapore)*

“Because my ‘younger self’ was energetic, strong and vital, I find that practicing not only mindfulness but self-compassion on a daily basis has been very important in living with grace and more ease with two challenging medical conditions.” ~ *Jan Hempstead, RN, BCC (Albany, N.Y.)*

“I remind myself about changing my self-talk to be more compassionate. I have suffered chronic headaches for more than 30 years. One day my acupuncturist said, ‘If you were a little child, you wouldn’t be yelling at them about why they had another headache, would you?’ That was a very clear sign that maybe I should change my self-talk.” ~ *Jane Joseph, RD, Certified Health/Wellness Coach, Am I Hungry? Mindful Eating Program facilitator (Spokane, Wash.)*

“Having been raised by a very critical parent, it is almost second nature to first criticize. What I’ve done is install a loving parent who immediately kicks in with love and compassion.” ~ *Linda L Lawless, MA, LMFT, LMHC (Vallejo, Calif.)*

“I think it’s hard for all people to truly believe that if we are kind to ourselves, we can still change. We tend to think that we have to be critical in order to be motivated.” ~ *Catherine Wilson Gillespie, PhD (Des Moines, Iowa)*

## What challenges arise when you invite your clients to be kind to themselves?

“The resistance I see usually comes from guilt feelings and negative self-talk.” ~ *Ann Asher, FNP (Georgia, U.S.)*

“The main obstacle we all face is learning to retrain our minds to value our lives as individuals and make the effort necessary to be kind to ourselves.” ~ *Angela Bewick, RHN (Calgary, Canada)*

“Clients are afraid that if they stop beating themselves up and start treating themselves kindly, they’ll start eating and never stop.” ~ *Jean Fain, a Harvard Medical School-affiliated psychotherapist (Concord, Mass.)*

“My clients say, ‘I’m good to myself; I get my hair done, have a housekeeping service,’ etc. The challenge is to help them see that doing for themselves is not always the same as being kind to themselves.” ~ *Michele Paiva CHt, MBSR, ERYT (Downingtown, Pa.)*

“Being self-critical and feeling undeserving are challenges.” ~ *Camerin Ross, PhD (Tiburon, Calif.)*

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## How do you help your clients shift their self-talk from critical to compassionate?

“Working with Kristin Neff’s teachings helps them realize that they are allowed to talk to themselves differently: loving kindness, common humanity, mindfulness.” ~ *Cuca Azinovic, Wellness Coach and Mindfulness Expert (Alcobendas, Spain)*

“Matrix Reimprinting, an advanced form of EFT, appears to be the most effective in learning self-love and compassion. We often do amazing intergenerational work that simply changes the hearts and minds of my clients in astonishing ways.” ~ *Ruthi Cohen-Joyner, MPH, RD, LDN (Locust, N.C.)*

“I try to provide clients with unconditional regard to model how they might care for themselves.” ~ *Karen R. Koenig, LCSW, MEd (Sarasota, Fla.)*



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