

Write a Letter to Your Suffering Self

By:

Heather Stone, Ph.D.

Clients tell me that they have absolutely no idea how to have self-compassion, and while they easily demonstrate compassion for others, they just don't know how to be compassionate with themselves. First, let me take some of the pressure off of you by suggesting that you don't have to be over-the-top, out of character, or even "gushy" when you treat yourself compassionately. Rather, try to acknowledge your suffering with some sincere appreciation or sympathy. Simply wish for your own wellbeing. And most importantly, do not ever judge yourself as bad, stupid, or weak.

As an exercise in self-compassion, I suggest that you try to mentally divide yourself into two different parts. Imagine, if you will, that you are two separate selves, one that is wise and compassionate, and the other that is deeply suffering. Because many people are invested in avoiding or rejecting their anxious selves, just noticing this part can sometimes feel uncomfortable. What helps is to envision looking at your Suffering Self as if it were seated in an empty chair, right in front of you.

Who, exactly, is this Suffering Self? This is the part that is hurt and scared, the part that is hoping for reassurance and assistance. It is the part of you that's "younger." When humans suffer – when we are sick, injured, or anxious – we tend to *regress* in the sense that we actually feel smaller. In those moments, it can feel like our regular adult self just completely disappeared, putting this younger side in charge of any given situation. But if you think about it, the younger part is the least equipped to deal with something difficult, because when we're younger, we don't have skills, confidence, or experience. We shouldn't expect this injured or frightened self to take charge or to do battle for us. And yet, we continually do so, often pushing this self to the front lines, so to speak.

Even if you have had little exposure to some caring, competent adults, you can still picture how such persons *would* behave. Capable adults can be soothing and calming. They are also better at seeing alternate perspectives, acting less impulsively, articulating their needs, utilizing resources, considering options, and most importantly, making direct requests.

What helps is to envision looking with compassion and curiosity at your own Suffering Self, as if it were seated in front of you. Try to consider, *how does this image look to you, at this moment? What is its age? What can you say about its posture, countenance, or mood? What might this Suffering Self be thinking? What does it want?* Amazingly, you might begin to

describe this vulnerable part in much detail. Try to consider whether there is hope or hopelessness, what type of assistance, protection or company it needs, and from whom.

After learning more about your Suffering Self, begin writing your letter, as best you can. Take whatever time is needed to make it as personal and meaningful as possible. In terms of content, here are a few guidelines:

The majority of the letter is simply about offering validation. This is because when we are suffering, we don't want so much to be talked out of our pain, and we don't always need to be given advice. Rather, we want to know that our suffering was real, that it mattered, and that we feel understood. So, write as if you can convey this type of sympathy and understanding. These are some general phrases that could be used:

Dear Suffering Self,

I understand that when you are in this difficult place, you feel _____.

When things are this hard, you want to _____.

You start to think that _____, and wonder whether _____.

You can't help wishing that _____.

_____ is a thought that often comes into your mind.

If you could long for anything it would be that you could have _____, _____, _____.

If somebody could just care enough to notice, they would see _____.

_____ is what you need the most, but you have sometimes wondered whether it would ever come.

Having _____ would make all the difference in the world.

The last part is to provide a comforting presence while refraining from giving instructions or advice. Such statements might be,

Suffering Self, you are so right to feel this way! This makes perfect sense to me. Of course you would feel exactly as you do. You have been in this place for such a long time, and I realize how hard this has been for you. I can see that you are in so much pain.

I am here with you; you don't have to feel alone.

I see your goodness and your value.

You may have been overlooked or misunderstood in the past, but you are not anymore.

I trust you, and want to earn your trust as well.

I see the truth and the situation you are in, exactly as you do.

I know I have fallen short sometimes, but now I want to be here, I want to do my best.

*I will stay with you so that you can feel reassured.
I care deeply about your feelings and your struggle.
Everything about you and what you are feeling matters to me.
If I could protect you, if I could stand by your side – even in certain moments of your past – I
would do so unhesitatingly.
I am by your side and will take care of you. You are not alone.
I hope you can feel my presence. I'm here for you."*

The importance of this letter has many aspects to it, but the most relevant piece is that it will create a reminder or bridge for you to find your inner strength during difficult times. Put this letter somewhere where you will find it, and if you're ever in a scared, hopeless or desperate state of mind, just take this letter out and read it. And try to believe it. After all, it came from the wisest, most compassionate part of you.

©2016 Heather Stone, Ph.D.