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Article

Healing the Inner, Traumatized Critic: Self-Compassion as a Path to Recovery from Stress at Work

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Abstract

Building on the ancient and spiritual call to care for self and others, recent research (2020–2025) demonstrates that self-compassion improves resilience, self-care, emotional regulation, and recovery from workplace stress across diverse sectors including healthcare, education, and public safety. Defined through as self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, self-compassion fosters meaning and supports inner hope by helping individuals hold their suffering self-lovingly with understanding rather than self-criticism. Emerging findings reveal that compassion-based interventions improve psychological wellbeing, reduce burnout, and enhance physiological markers of recovery such as heart rate variability (HRV). This paper synthesises current evidence and highlights implications for chaplains, carers, and leaders in developing compassionate work environments that support sustainable wellbeing and people's search for meaning. Some practical suggestions for chaplains and organisational leaders particularly in the areas of using self-kindness and naming to gently acknowledge and releasing stress and not ruminating when mistakes or stress arise. This may require workplace education programs. While more research is needed, recent research affirms that self-compassion leads to notable improvements in self-reflection, psychological empowerment and reduces burnout and workplace stress. Future research directions are also offered.

Keywords: workplace stress; self-compassion; leadership; rumination; embitterment; chaplaincy; pastoral care

Introduction

The deliberate choice to enact self-compassion in response to workplace stress is receiving much attention. However, in reality it is not a new motif or way of being. In this, the Christian Gospel's call to "*love your neighbour as yourself*" (Mark 12:31) is often understood as a loving directive toward compassion and altruism, yet its wisdom also lies in the balance it demands: care for others and care for self both as inseparable options for living a fuller and more kindly life.

To love one's neighbour *as oneself* implies that compassion must begin inwardly; we cannot offer to others what we consistently deny within. In the modern, secular workplace, this principle finds practical expression through empathy-based leadership, psychological safety, and self-care practices that enable sustainable service rather than burnout. When employees and leaders alike act from a place of balanced compassion, workplaces become communities of respect and shared wellbeing. While its origin is scriptural, the call holds *universal resonance* echoing across faiths and philosophies as a timeless ethic of mutual care, dignity, and humanity that transcends religious boundaries.

In both Buddhist and Hindu traditions, the principle of self-compassion is deeply woven into the fabric of spiritual and ethical life, though expressed through different language and practice. In Buddhism, this is embodied in the concept of "*metta*" which is loving-kindness toward oneself and all beings and "*karuṇā*," compassion arising from the recognition of shared suffering. These are cultivated through mindfulness and meditative reflection, training the mind to meet pain and imperfection with gentleness rather than judgment. In Hindu thought, similar compassion is

grounded in “ahimsa,” the commitment to non-harm, and “atma-bhava,” recognising the divine essence within oneself and others. Practically, in modern workplaces, these traditions translate into mindful awareness, ethical leadership, and reflective pauses that foster inner balance and non-reactivity. Employees and leaders who embody these principles practice patient listening, intentional calm in stress, and compassionate communication—creating environments where both personal wellbeing and collective harmony are nurtured.

From a modern psychology perspective, *self-compassion*, emerged as a positive psychological choice from Kristen Neff (2003a, 2003b). It encompasses three interacting components: *self-kindness*, *common humanity*, and *mindfulness*:

- *Self-kindness*: involves extending understanding and care to oneself in moments of difficulty.
- *Common humanity*: notes that suffering and imperfection are part of human experience.
- *Mindfulness*: cultivates balanced awareness of painful thoughts and feelings rather than over-identifying with them.

Together, these three active choices support meaning, purpose, and hope which are not coincidentally, core psycho-spiritual themes or constructs relevant to chaplaincy care and workplace wellbeing. By holding distress with gentle attention, workers can experience emotional recovery while maintaining purpose and integrity in demanding roles (Germer & Neff, 2013; Dodson & Heng, 2022).

Finally, by way of background, my 2015 research argued that self-compassion should be integrated into responses to workplace suffering and burnout alongside established clinical and organizational approaches. Framing the workplace as a site where moral injury and meaning-related distress can arise, not only in acute trauma contexts, I proposed self-compassion (mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness) as a psycho-spiritual resource that reframes failure and reduces harsh self-criticism.

Drawing on evidence that self-compassion is negatively associated with rumination, anxiety, and thought suppression, and positively associated with wellbeing and connectedness, I pointed to positions chaplains and allied caregivers pivotal roles in assisting staff to help workers cultivate these practices as part of interdisciplinary care. I closed with practical directions including the need to contextualize therapies (e.g., cognitive processing therapy) within self-compassion theory, further extend research on self-compassion to workplace and military settings and more intentionally include spiritual care in treatment pathways. Overall, the benefits posited by self-compassion included self-care, enhanced resilience and potentially, post-traumatic growth through balanced self-responsibility for wellness, rather than pathology-only frames.

Purpose

To assist workplace pastoral care and self-care, the purpose of this brief paper is to review and synthesize how self-compassion has evolved in recent workplace research: from 2020 to 2025. It seeks to describe self-compassion’s mechanisms of action and draw implications for chaplains, carers, and organisational leaders. It builds on emerging studies that position self-compassion not only as a personal coping resource but as a systemic, cultural, and spiritual practice that shapes psychologically safe workplaces.

Recent Developments in Workplace Self-Compassion Research (2020–2025)

Healthcare research has been particularly active. Sawyer, Tao, and Bailey (2023b) demonstrated that the RISE program for nurses enhanced resilience and self-compassion while reducing burnout. Similar findings emerged for nurse leaders, where structured psychoeducational programs improved mental wellbeing (Sawyer, Tao, and Bailey, 2023a). In allied studies, Super et al. (2024) showed that a brief, self-guided online self-compassion course for healthcare workers increased wellbeing and decreased perceived stress with sustained benefits at follow-up. Together, these findings validate

brief, digitally-delivered compassion interventions as practical and scalable tools for workforce wellbeing.

Beyond healthcare, Andersson et al. (2022) conducted a randomised controlled trial comparing compassion training with physical exercise in mixed-sector employees. Results indicated greater growth in self-compassion and modest advantages for stress reduction in the compassion condition. This study reinforced the role of compassion training in enhancing emotional recovery and sense of coherence in diverse occupational groups.

Newer lines of inquiry address mechanisms that impede or enhance these outcomes. Souza et al. (2024) found that high self-criticism and fear of self-compassion predicted lower work engagement and higher burnout—highlighting the importance of addressing these fears explicitly in program design. Such findings align with compassion-focused therapy approaches that normalise vulnerability and reframe self-care as courage rather than weakness.

Physiological research also points to the effects of self-compassion. Heart Rate Variability (HRV) refers to the natural fluctuation in time between consecutive heartbeats, a sensitive index of autonomic nervous system balance. Higher HRV, particularly vagally-mediated indices such as the root-mean-square of successive differences (RMSSD) and high-frequency HRV, reflect greater parasympathetic regulation and adaptive stress recovery. Studies have shown that individuals with higher trait self-compassion exhibit higher HRV and lower negative affect under stress (Luo et al., 2018; Di Bello et al., 2021). These physiological findings support the interpretation that compassion training modulates threat responses and enhances emotional regulation capacities and assisting in spiritual care and psychological recovery.

A 2025 systematic review synthesised findings from nineteen workplace studies and found consistent small-to-moderate reductions in stress and burnout following compassion-based interventions (Martins, Palmeira, & Matos, 2025). These effects were strongest when programs included follow-up sessions and leadership endorsement to promote transfer of training into daily practice. This research signals a shift from one-off mindfulness sessions toward embedded organisational strategies that reinforce self-compassion as a professional norm.

Self-Compassion: Five practical Shifts Arising from Awareness

Steen, Di Lemma, Finnegan, Wepa and McGhee (2021) pointed to the need for self-compassion awareness and training. Their research found that self-compassion serves as a protective factor for veterans' mental and physical health, particularly in mitigating trauma-related conditions such as PTSD, guilt, and depression. Across 17 U.S.-based studies, evidence showed that self-compassion training improved wellbeing, resilience, and coping, suggesting its promise for veterans recovering from combat and moral distress.

Similarly, Othman, Steen, Wepa and McKellar (2022) found that self-compassion education for parents enhances psychological well-being, mindfulness, and kindness while reducing anxiety and distress. They also found support for developing structured programs to help parents sustain emotional health and resilience in the demands of caregiving. Then, Wepa (2025) argues that self-compassion is not a fix for structural problems in health systems, yet it meaningfully bolsters resilience, social support, and self-efficacy improving quality of life for staff (and, by extension, safer care). Self-compassion extends mindfulness by not only accepting difficult experiences but also embracing the experience with warmth (Neff, 2003), making it a pragmatic antidote to burnout pressures documented across the workforce. Wepa (2025) recommends five practical shifts:

- **Address self-pity:** education can help recognise and respectfully name painful moments and address them with kindness, name them, and let them pass as part of common humanity rather than ruminating;
- **See compassion as strength:** “toughing it out” does not support wellbeing it fuels harm, whereas self-forgiveness helps restore calm, clarity, and sustained coping;
- **Reduce defeatism:** replace harsh self-critique with honest recognition and constructive self-talk that supports motivation and accountability;

- **Stabilise oneself beyond self-esteem:** esteem rises and falls with praise, but self-compassion functions like a steady hull in rough seas; and
- **Care for self to care for others:** soothing oneself creates an inner buffer that enables empathic presence without emotional depletion, a vital protection in bullying-prone, high-demand settings, particularly for new graduates.

Self-Compassion, Workplace Rumination, and Embitterment (2022–2025)

Recent evidence indicates that self-compassion helps interrupt perseverative (repetitive or stuck) thinking at work. Among university teachers, work stress predicted depressive symptoms partly via work-related rumination; critically, higher self-compassion weakened both the direct and indirect (rumination) effects, suggesting a buffer on the *stress* → *rumination* → *distress pathway* (Wu, Cao, & Du, 2023). In organisational contexts marked by insecurity, qualitative job insecurity predicted instigated workplace incivility through negative emotions, and this indirect effect was weaker for employees higher in self-compassion and stronger for those higher in rumination (Qian, Lim, & Gao, 2022).

More broadly, recent work shows facets of self-compassion relate to lower rumination and better psychological health, replicating the protective association in non-clinical adult samples (Yamasaki, Sampei, & Miyata, 2024). Parallel findings in education settings show self-compassion can buffer emotional exhaustion–depression links, consistent with reduced perseveration when resources are depleted (Chen et al., 2023).

In terms of embitterment, a 2025 study in unemployed adults reported that self-compassion moderated the association between post-traumatic embitterment and suicidality, indicating a possible workplace application where perceived injustice fuels chronic resentment (Oh, Jung, & Na, 2025). Together, these studies, while not yet comprehensive, suggest self-compassion may lower ruminative and embittered responding, reducing personal risk and the interpersonal fallout (e.g., incivility), especially when paired with organisational practices that legitimise reflection, rest, and repair.

Implications for Chaplains, Carers, and Leaders at Work

For mental health practitioners and chaplains, self-compassion serves as both a clinical and pastoral intervention. This is because it is about kindly, self-care and encourages reflective gentleness toward one's own limitations and negative self-talk reducing empathic fatigue, and modelling humane self-acceptance that fosters moral repair in those they support.

For chaplains and pastoral carers, specifically, self-compassion functions both as a personal discipline and a pastoral methodology. Practising self-kindness amid moral distress allows chaplains to remain grounded and empathic while maintaining emotional boundaries. By modelling common humanity and acceptance of imperfection, chaplains foster trust and psychological safety within care relationships. Brief embodied practices—such as mindful breathing or compassionate self-phrasing during debriefs help re-orient both carers and those they support toward hope and meaning.

For organisational leaders, self-compassion represents a key leadership competency that shapes positive work climates. Leaders who legitimise rest, recovery, and self-forgiveness model moral humility and foster climates where vulnerability is seen as a strength. Embedding self-compassion into supervision, feedback, and performance systems encourages balanced reflection rather than perfectionism. Programs that explicitly integrate leadership reinforcement demonstrate stronger, longer-term wellbeing outcomes (Dodson & Heng, 2022; Martins, Palmeira, & Matos, 2025).

Summary

Between 2020 and 2025, the evidence for self-compassion as a workplace resource has expanded rapidly. Interventions have moved beyond individual coping toward organisational transformation. By cultivating self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, workers develop both

psychological resilience and spiritual depth. For chaplains, carers, and leaders, fostering self-compassion enhances presence, empathy, and sustainable service—offering a humane antidote to chronic stress and moral fatigue.

Another fertile direction involves the *integration of self-compassion with existing self-care systems*, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), clinical supervision, and resilience or wellbeing initiatives. Self-compassion training could serve as the “missing affective link” that helps staff internalise and sustain benefits gained from counselling or structured interventions. For example, pairing compassion-based reflection with EAP follow-up sessions or annual wellbeing reviews could enhance continuity of care. Similarly, embedding compassion-based micro-practices before or after periods of leave may help staff return from annual holidays or professional development with renewed moral energy and perspective.

Recalling Wepa (2025), here are five practical recommendations:

- **Acknowledge and release and don't ruminate:** when mistakes or stress arise, meet them with kindness, name the emotion, and let it pass rather than replaying it in self-criticism. This may require workplace education programs.
- **Recognise compassion as strength:** owning pain and practising forgiveness restores calm, clarity, and the courage to keep serving with empathy.
- **Replace defeat with honest encouragement:** accept shortcomings, speak to yourself as you would to a colleague in need, and move forward constructively.
- **Anchor deeper than self-esteem:** let your worth rest on steady self-acceptance rather than fluctuating praise or performance.
- **Care inwardly to care outwardly:** use self-compassion to create inner balance, sustain empathy, and protect against burnout in yourself and your teams.

A further implication concerns the *culture of rest, reflection, and forgiveness* as psychologically astute actions related not only to safety but to personal and corporate sense-making and healing. Organisations that honour recovery time acknowledge the psycho-spiritual truth that human beings cannot operate at full capacity indefinitely. Encouraging compassionate pauses i.e short reflective breaks, collegial check-ins, or brief contemplative practices affirms rest as a caring act rather than a luxury. Integrating forgiveness into performance conversations, supervision, and leadership communication helps normalise human error and fosters climates where learning, rather than blame, as the dominant response to mistakes. In such contexts, self-compassion evolves into communal compassion: an ethic of shared humanity that allows individuals and teams alike to flourish.

Future Research

Future research should explore how self-compassion contributes not only to individual recovery but to *collective wellbeing and team cohesion*. Early qualitative findings suggest that when individuals treat themselves with kindness, they become less defensive and more open to feedback qualities that enhance trust and collegial care. They also point to reduced workplace rumination, moral distress, and embitterment. If confirmed, this should be integrated into pastoral practice and organisational wellbeing programs which seek to offer practical pathways toward healthier, more forgiving, and spiritually grounded workplaces. Investigating these processes in multi-level or longitudinal designs could illuminate how compassionate self-relations translate into *effective team care*, shared psychological safety, and ethical climates where staff can bring their whole selves to work.

Conclusion

Self-compassion represents an emerging bridge between psychological science, organisational wellbeing, and spirituality at work. Continued interdisciplinary research linking occupational health, theology, ethics, and organisational behaviour could help shape workplaces that are not only more productive but more profoundly humane. The next decade offers the chance to measure not just

outcomes but *the atmosphere of compassion itself that is*, how it transforms relationships, renews purpose and hope, and reminds us that all who serve that we are all human.

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