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## **ADAPTED EXERCISE: Compassionate Letter Writing to Increase Your Acceptance of a Difficult Performance-Related Experience**

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The following exercise is an adaptation of several compassion-based exercises in Paul Gilbert's (2010) book *Compassion Focused Therapy*, i.e., Soothing Breathing Rhythm, Creating a Safe Place, Creating a Compassionate Ideal, and Compassionate Letter Writing. These exercises have shown to increase activity in the *Soothing and Contentment System*. Before starting, set aside a pen and piece of paper, which you'll later use to write down information that will aid you in this exercise.

1) First, we'll ask you to engage in a brief mindfulness meditation, which will enable you to find a breathing rhythm that soothes you.

*Start by sitting upright in your chair with wakeful posture, with your feet flat on the floor, your arms and legs uncrossed, hands resting in your lap either palms up or down, with your head, neck and spine aligned and lifted up towards the sky... If this is uncomfortable, please assume a different seated position until you're more comfortable.*

*When you're ready, close your eyes, or if you prefer to keep them open, just fix them on an object on the floor in front of you... Allow yourself to have a gentle facial expression that embodies kindness, like a slight smile... .. Begin by just noticing your breath the way it is, without attempting to control it... Spend about one minute just observing how you are breathing... .. If your breath is shallow, let it be shallow... Simply observe it without needing to change it... Place one hand on your chest, and the other on your belly..., to help you further detect where your breathing occurs... .. If your breath is still shallow, you'll feel it more in your chest... Try and drop your breath down into your belly, if you don't feel it there already... .. Let's run an experiment - breathe a little faster than normal... .. you'll likely feel your breath more in your chest... Then breathe a little slower than normal... .. you'll likely feel it in your belly... Then, find a breathing rhythm that is natural for you... .. This natural rhythm is your own... it's your breath at rest... .. Don't change your breathing, simply observe it the way it is. Keep breathing at this rhythm for another two minutes... .. Usually, your breath will become slower and deeper the more you let it be... If this isn't the case yet, drop your breath down into your belly again... and make sure your breaths are about the same length... 3 seconds in ... hold for a second... then 3 seconds out... hold for another second... and repeat this pattern for 30 seconds... .. then let your breath return to its natural rhythm... ..*

When you allow yourself to breathe how you naturally do, and when you are in sync with this rhythm, your breath becomes a source of soothing and calmness for you. This will create a feeling of safeness.

2) Now that you're feeling safe, we'll ask you to think of a difficult experience you've had as a professional or student musician. It could be suffering with MPA, receiving a negative evaluation of your performance by a teacher or the press, making a mistake during a recent performance, dealing with a painful injury, etc. Also, you'll want to include a brief description of your emotional distress related to this experience. When you have it, please write it below. We'll use the example of a student musician receiving a negative evaluation by their teacher.

**Sample experience** - *receiving a negative evaluation of my performance by my teacher. I feel embarrassed for not performing as well as my teacher thought I should've performed. I feel*

ashamed for not being as prepared as I could've been. I'm also nervous to return to my next lesson with my teacher.

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3) When you have the experience in mind, now we'll ask you to imagine a kind person whom you'd wish to have an honest conversation with about this difficult experience. We'll call this person your "compassionate guide." It could be someone like your partner, a parent, a good friend, your therapist, a teacher, or an imagined person. When picking a guide, make sure they have qualities you'd want in a compassionate person whom you'll confide in, i.e., wise, understanding, patient, knowledgeable, kind, warm, gentle, strong, having your best interest in mind, etc. Try and include any sensory qualities about your guide into your image of them too, e.g., like their tone of voice, their smile, what color their clothing is, the way they talk, a prominent physical feature of theirs, etc. If you're imagining someone not real, imagine your guide having a soft tone of voice and a gentle manner, and them being patient and non-judgmental of you. Imagine also how you'd like them to relate to you, and how you'd like to relate to them, and imagine them genuinely wanting you to be free from suffering.

Imagine having the conversation in a safe place too, where you'll feel totally safe and unencumbered. It could be fictional, like a scene in a beautiful forest in which you're seated next to your guide on a large tree stump. Or it could be real, like a summer's day at your favorite beach, with your guide seated next to you on a beach chair. When you pick a place, try and add details from multiple senses so you'll feel more immersed in this experience (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, things you touch).

Write down who your guide is and where's a safe place for your conversation:

**Sample place** - my best friend and I are seated at my favorite beach. It's a perfect summer's day, and there are children playing in the sand close to me. I feel the sunlight gently warming my skin, and I can smell the salty air around me. I can feel my toes dipping into the sand, as I lay back in my chair and relax. I hear the waves crashing in the distance and the sounds of people splashing one another.

**Sample guide** - My best friend is listening attentively to me as I discuss how upset I am about my teacher's last evaluation of my performance. She is occasionally asking me to pause so she can make sure she's understood me, like she always does. Her tone of voice is gentle and she's wearing a blue shirt, which matches the sky.

**Safe Place:**

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**Your Guide:**

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4) Now, we invite you to write down, in a letter format *to yourself*, some soothing things you'd like to hear from your guide, *written from the perspective of your compassionate guide*. In order to do this, you'll want to make sure your letter includes some of the following qualities, according to Gilbert's recommendations (2010):

- It expresses concern and genuine caring for you.
- It is sensitive to your emotional distress, which you've already written down.
- It is sympathetic and responds emotionally to your distress.
- It helps you face your difficult feelings and become more accepting of them.
- It helps you become more understanding of and reflective of your feelings, dilemmas, and difficulties.
- It is non-judgmental.
- The letter exudes a genuine sense of warmth, understanding, and caring.
- It helps you think about the behavior(s) you might need to learn in order to grow.

It's also important your letter isn't simply a string of complaints about yourself, nor is it filled with admonishing advice (Gilbert, 2010). Rather, it should focus on your difficult feelings, encourage you to reflect on them and accept them, and develop a compassionate and balanced way of working with them. Remember, you don't want to view these feelings as threats or problems to overcome. Doing so will activate the threat-detecting mode and/or the drive-excitement mode. Truly activating the soothing-contentment mode requires following Gilbert's recommendations. After reading our sample letter, please write your own letter. Don't



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**Sincerely,**  
**Your compassionate guide**

5) Lastly, you'll want to read your letter aloud to yourself to practice talking to yourself in a compassionate manner. When doing so, deliberately slow down your speech and adopt a gentle tone of voice. Also, adopt any other of your compassion guide's qualities you'd like, to help you further benefit from this exercise. With repeated practice, you'll start to adopt this way of talking to yourself more when you're dealing with future difficulties.