

White Paper

Creating Compassion

**Improving Health and Wellbeing in the
Workplace with Self-Compassion**

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Health and Wellbeing at Work:

- Building healthy workplaces is integral to Creating Compassion's purpose of championing better work and working lives. The 2021 annual Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) shows that stress continues to be one of the main causes of short and long term absence from work.

- The COVID-19 Pandemic has had a dramatic impact on organisations, prompting them to transform their working practices on an unprecedented scale to look after people's health, safety and wellbeing. The experience of the pandemic will have exacerbated – rather than alleviated – most of the challenges, including the pressure on many people's mental health.

- The CIPD survey identifies a number of priority actions for organisations, including the need to develop a strategic and holistic approach to people's health, safety and wellbeing. This approach should focus on prevention as well as providing effective support pathways for people if they become unwell.

- Organisations need to put in place a systematic framework, with tools to assess the main physical and psychological risks to people's health, so that they can target their activity where it's needed. There also has to be visible commitment from the senior leadership team to make these aims a reality and ensure wellbeing is embedded – and taken seriously – across the organisation.

The CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey also showed the following in relation to leadership and mental health:

Leadership:

- Senior leaders do have employee wellbeing on their agenda but now, more than ever, we need leaders who show compassion and actively foster a culture that engenders trust and kindness. This will encourage people to have the courage to discuss any health concerns in the knowledge that they will be listened to and receive understanding and support.
- Managing people, and their health and wellbeing, is a big job – and an important one. Line managers are under considerable pressure in the current climate, and they'll also be experiencing many of the same concerns as those they manage. To perform their role effectively, managers need the behaviours, education and capability they will only gain from receiving the right training, support and expert guidance.

Mental Health:

The CIPD Survey shows that Mental health is the most common focus of health and wellbeing activity but

- Most respondents are concerned about the impact of the pandemic on employees' mental health, however many organisations have stepped up their efforts to tackle mental ill health and stress.
- Although more organisations are providing training to build personal resilience, and more are taking a preventative approach to manage stress through efforts to identify risks and causes, in organisations with more than 250 employees, 91% of respondents report some stress-related absence.
- Only 50% of respondents believe their organisation is effective in tackling workplace stress or in identifying and managing the mental health risks arising from COVID-19.
- Furthermore, respondents remain less positive regarding the skills and confidence of managers to support and assist with mental health, despite improvements over the last few years.

Overall findings of the CIPD Survey show:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has already posed unimaginable risks to populations across the globe and inevitably it's impact has extended directly into UK workplaces.
- There is a very high level of concern on the part of HR professionals for people's mental health as a result of the challenges they face.
- Although many organisations are increasing their focus on health and wellbeing, this can fail to consider **preventative support** for mental health issues which would provide people with a set of tools to manage their own psychological wellbeing and that of the people they lead.
- Senior leaders have the opportunity to transform the culture as well as practice in their organisations, this includes recognising and responding to their own need for psychological wellbeing.
- Line managers need training to enhance their capability to support people's mental health.
- A key priority for HR professionals is to ensure that health and wellbeing continues to receive heightened attention in the boardroom when the threat from COVID19 recedes and it's no longer an urgent business continuity issue.
- Health and wellbeing practice can never stand still because it needs to evolve to meet the constantly changing influences of the wider environment and employee needs.
- There is a risk that everyone's health and wellbeing is severely challenged during these difficult times and it can be all too easy to underplay the impact this has, not only on our work and organisations but also in our personal lives. Seeking support is a sign of strength, not weakness, and the wellbeing offer provided by evidence-based interventions, such as those designed and delivered by Creating Compassion, are available to anyone who may need them.

It is clear is that organisations that take a more proactive approach and conduct critical evaluations of their activity, to ensure continuous improvement, are considerably more likely to achieve positive organisational outcomes in regard to employee health and wellbeing.

Implications of the impact of stress in the workplace:

As the findings from the latest CIPD Survey suggest, employees are at great risk of burning out from the stress involved in delivering high quality goods and services to large numbers of consumers. For many organisations, balancing a steady increase in demand whilst also negotiating within a constrained global economy, can lead to the daily reality of delivering more for less. This often leaves the question as to how staff are enabled and supported to be consistently productive and compassionate without detriment to their own wellbeing (Egan et al., 2016).

With today's uncertain outlook, further prompted by the implications of the COVID19 Pandemic, Brexit and pressing global concerns, the age of anxiety appears never ending to many. The immense challenge of operating in the current constantly shifting landscape only increases stress and other mental health related issues which has an impact on us all, particularly those who are responsible for leading others in their organisation. Compassion is central to the practice of leadership (Georges, 2011) and leadership is recognised as the most important influence on an organisation's culture (West et al., 2014).

Developing self-compassion in the workplace:

For authentic and sustainable compassion to be established and maintained, in an ever changing and constantly challenging economy, we need to understand what this means to the individuals responsible for delivering goods and services in organisations. We have found that providing training to individuals to develop their self-compassion, can have profound effects on the way they view themselves and the compassion they are able to give to others in their working lives. As occupational psychologists, we have found this approach can impact widely on the fabric of participants' organisations, as they become compassion champions and lead the way in terms of policy, processes and working practices.

Developing self-compassion provides the tools and techniques to more adequately self-support and replenish emotional and physical resources, so as to increase resilience to deal with the demands of any role more effectively. We would therefore suggest that our programmes which outline the theory and practice of self-compassion are aimed at the needs of all employees – from frontline to board room.

Practices are introduced to help ease stress, fatigue and burnout with the aim of cultivating equanimity in public facing roles. This applies equally to managers and team leaders as they hold the responsibility for the care and welfare of the staff they lead. All our programmes are based on specifically addressing the needs of leaders and staff, having been developed over many years based on feedback from hundreds of organisations.

Background to self-compassion:

“Our every interaction every day shapes our world. To the extent that we are present with and pay attention to all those we interact with, understand their challenges, empathise with them, and take action to help them, we create a more compassionate world. To have the capacity and resilience to show compassion to others, we must first practice self-compassion.”

Professor Michael West, Lancaster University Management School, 2017

To provide a sense of the background to this work, it is understood, from both an academic and research perspective, that the understanding and practice of self-compassion is critical for individuals to be able to offer authentic and sustainable compassion to others (Gilbert, 2009; Neff, 2011). In fact, it can be stated that, “self-compassion is the foundation of compassion for others” Germer (2009).

Through the programmes we have designed and deliver, we have found that providing training to individuals to develop their self-compassion has had profound effects on the way they view themselves and the compassion they are able to give to others – both personally and professionally. Some participants on previous programmes have described the approach to be “life-changing” and have found that their attendance has significantly enhanced the interactions they are able to have in their working environment.

Practising self-compassion takes on greater importance when we are in a public facing profession. In the course of our work, we speak with a range of professionals on a daily basis and they readily acknowledge how rarely they pause to notice how they themselves are feeling and how easily they can neglect their own needs. The self-compassion programmes we have developed are specifically designed to help staff and leaders better understand their own needs and learn to respond to themselves with kindness and compassion. The content is based on the premise that through our own practice, the knowing that comes from doing, we can best help others.

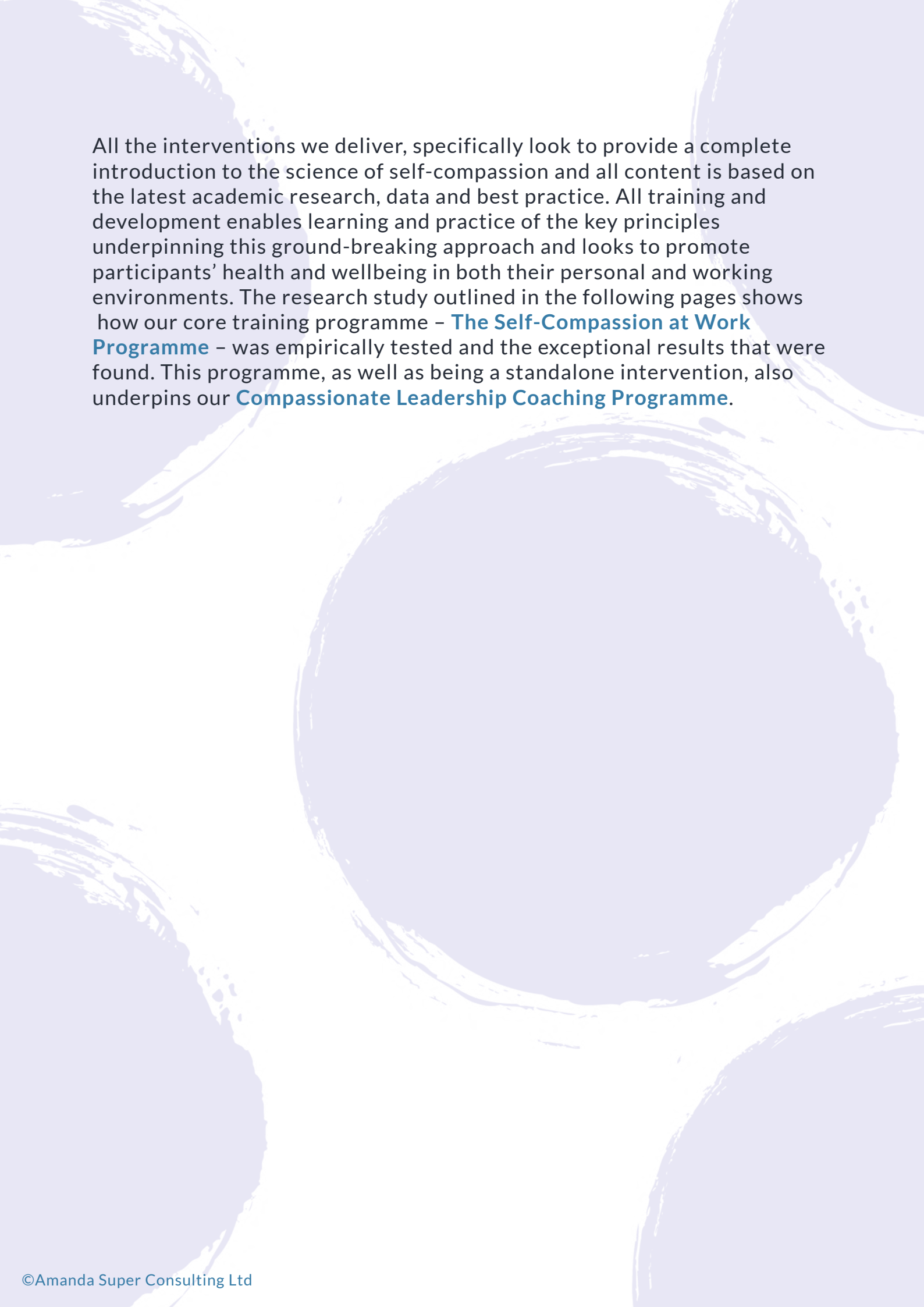
The academic research on self-compassion advocates three main components, which underpin the training we deliver – self-kindness – as opposed to self-criticism; our connection to others – as opposed to a sense of isolation; mindfulness which relates to noticing how we are feeling in the present moment without judgement – as opposed to over-identifying with our emotions and automatically responding (Neff, 2003). These elements form the basis of both the theoretical and practical concepts we introduce to the participants on all the programmes we offer in this subject area. Through the use of guided and experiential exercises, the participants gain practical skills to help bring self-compassion and fulfilling, balanced authenticity to live and work sustainably in their daily lives. We also advocate the development of ‘fierce compassion’ (Neff, 2021) which enables individuals to protect themselves from the inevitable challenges and pain we experience in life through brave, empowered clarity and be motivated to work towards the changes we need to see in our organisations and societies through encouraging, wise vision.

Our approach to developing self-compassion:

Self-compassion can initially be a challenging concept to many of us. Our individualistic western culture doesn't promote our connection to others, and we have few role models to show us how to self-care. It is difficult for us to always know how we feel as well as how to handle perfectly natural emotional responses to difficult situations. Many of us act with compassion towards others, especially those we care for, but easily neglect ourselves and may find it difficult to accept compassion from others. The evidence shows that we can learn how to develop self-compassion, in fact the research and our experience has displayed that it is an **entirely trainable skill**. We can become self-supporting in replenishing our stocks so that we are more able to show compassion to ourselves and others, in an authentic and sustainable way – both at work and closer to home.

Dr Amanda Super first became interested in self-compassion a number of years ago. She came to the realisation that building clients' self-esteem did not appear to assist them in times of difficulty and challenge. This is because self-esteem is dependent on everything going well and fails to provide us with any resilience to manage the unavoidable obstacles which are part of our lives. Amanda was assisting a number of senior leaders to develop their resilience to manage the inevitable challenge, in a constantly changing and ever-demanding work environment when she came across the work of Dr Kristin Neff. From this, she began to incorporate Neff's research into her leadership development practice and the results were proving invaluable to her clients.

Neff's (2003) pioneering work saw the development of a valid and reliable scale to measure self-compassion considering the components of self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. All three components, when delivered together have been shown to increase compassion for others (Jazaieri et al., 2013; Neff and Germer, 2013; Neff and Pommier, 2013) in addition to increased resilience and emotional intelligence (Heffernan et al., 2010; Neff and McGehee, 2010). In fact, self-compassion has been shown to be a protective factor for a wide range of well-being indicators (Duarte, 2016) including mental health.



All the interventions we deliver, specifically look to provide a complete introduction to the science of self-compassion and all content is based on the latest academic research, data and best practice. All training and development enables learning and practice of the key principles underpinning this ground-breaking approach and looks to promote participants' health and wellbeing in both their personal and working environments. The research study outlined in the following pages shows how our core training programme – **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** – was empirically tested and the exceptional results that were found. This programme, as well as being a standalone intervention, also underpins our **Compassionate Leadership Coaching Programme**.

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Research study to test The Self-Compassion at Work Programme conducted by Dr Amanda Super

Executive Summary



Aims

Self-compassion has been shown to be an approach that can support the health and wellbeing of individuals and enable them to stay well at work. The purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of a novel brief self-guided online intervention, The Self-Compassion at Work Programme in a work-based sample. The study aimed to understand whether the programme improved the health and wellbeing of staff and if these improvements were maintained at follow up.



Intervention

The Self-Compassion at Work Programme draws on the three core components of self-compassion (self-kindness/common humanity/mindfulness) as defined by Neff (2003). The programme is a four-week online intervention, designed by Dr Amanda Super, to develop individuals' self-compassion in the workplace. The programme consists of four pre-recorded training webinars covering the theory and practice of self-compassion, which can be engaged with at any time of day at a rate of one per week. Other programme materials include a daily reflective diary for the four-week period, a short weekly key task relating to the content of each webinar and an action plan to chart progress. The Self-Compassion at Work Programme has a suggested total delivery time of eight-hours across four weeks.



Design and Method

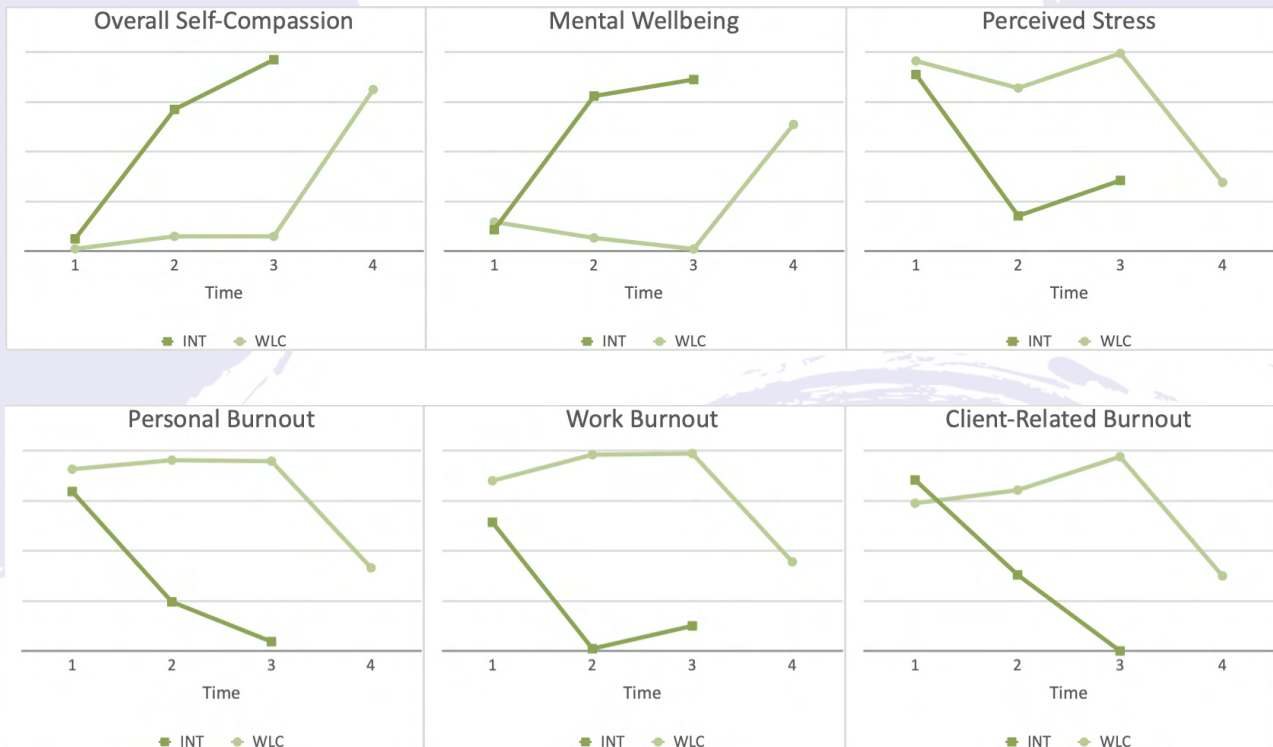
In a randomised control trial, 190 professionals were assigned to an intervention group (n.110) or a waitlist control group (n.80). Pre and post-programme data were collected from both groups and, at one-month follow up, from the intervention group. The waitlist control group also provided data immediately following their completion of programme.



Quantitative Results

The results showed a significant group by time interaction ($d=1.46$, $p<.001$) with a large overall effect size for **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** for the intervention group compared to the waitlist control group across time. Results also showed a significant effect of the programme on all the main study variables and the six Self-Compassion Scale subscales. Large effect sizes were seen for overall self-compassion ($d=1.07$) and self-kindness ($d=.95$); medium effects sizes for over-identification ($d=.80$), mental wellbeing ($d=.77$), self-judgement ($d=.77$), mindfulness ($d=.76$), common humanity ($d=.72$), isolation ($d=.59$), personal burnout ($d=.50$) and work burnout ($d=.50$); and small effect sizes for perceived stress ($d=.41$) and client-related burnout ($d=.38$).

Change in mean scores for intervention and waitlist control groups for main study outcome variables



N.B. From T1-T3 Total N=114. Time 1 = Before treatment for Intervention Group and Waitlist Control Group; Time 2 = After treatment for Intervention Group, Wait period for Waitlist Control Group; Time 3 = One-month Follow Up for Intervention Group, Wait period for Waitlist Control Group; Time 4 = After Treatment for Waitlist Control Group (n=48)

The findings confirmed the hypothesis that The Self-Compassion at Work Programme significantly improves the self-reported health and wellbeing of working professionals and these benefits are maintained at one-month follow up.



Qualitative Findings:

The post-programme evaluation completed by participants were arranged under a variety of headings employing 1-7 Likert Scales (1=low,7=high) to rate satisfaction and allowing for free text comments.



Self-Compassion at Work Programme Content:

In terms of satisfaction with the content of the programme, respondents reported mean ratings of 6.10 for webinar one, 6.13 for webinar two, 6.14 for webinar three and 6.18 for webinar four.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding the programme content are:

*“All the Webinars were **useful** and **easy to follow**.”*

*“Content and delivery were **excellent** – I felt like you were in the room just talking to me.”*

*“The **right amount of information** provided, the **pace was good**, the examples were very useful, and I especially **enjoyed** the guided meditations.”*

*“The pace was good, and so was the **quality** of the slides. I feel I have been able to **apply the learning** to my personal life and my approach to work.”*

*“The webinars were **well researched** and **informative** I found the webinars enjoyable to listen to and **calming**. I liked your calm voice and no-nonsense approach, which felt **down to earth** and **realistic**. I looked forward to listening to them and felt a sense of sadness at the end of the programme that there would not be another one.”*



Self-Compassion at Work Programme Support Materials:

When asked how useful the participants found the following support materials provided prior to the intervention, respondents reported mean ratings of 5.74 for the information sheet, 5.04 for the reflective daily diary provided with the programme, 5.48 for the key tasks they were required to complete each week and 5.19 for the action plan that was provided with the programme.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding the programme support materials are:

*“**Very easy** to use.”*

*“**Helpful** and **easy to understand** and follow.”*

*“The material was very useful, and I was able to **apply learned knowledge straight away** into my practice.”*

*“The length and style of the materials were **ideal**.”*

*“Key tasks were **excellent** at helping me keep focus on one aspect at a time. Really helped me to **focus**.”*



Self-Compassion at Work Programme Delivery:

When asked how satisfied participants were with the online delivery method of the programme, respondents reported a mean rating of 6.06. When asked how satisfied participants were with the four-week timescale in which the programme was delivered, respondents reported a mean rating of 5.48.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding the delivery of the programme are:

“Overall it was *straightforward* to use. *No problem* to access and *no difficulties* understanding.”

“Webinars were *accessible* and a *good method* to deliver this programme.”

“The time scale was *acceptable* – time enough to *embed practices* but not too protracted that I got bored.”

“*Online delivery* method *excellent*. Ease of use and understanding. *Good time scale*; I would have been daunted to be faced by a longer period, but it was long enough to *embed a daily routine*.”

“The online delivery meant it was *easy to do at home*.”



Self-Compassion at Work Programme Application:

In terms of programme application, participants were asked how able they were to apply the learnings from the programme to their daily lives, to respondents reported a mean rating of 5.36.

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding the participants' ability to apply the learnings from the programme to their daily lives are:

“As a direct result of watching the first webinar, *my anxiety levels reduced* a great deal that day and helped me to recognise that I needed to take steps to get on top of my feelings, and *it did not have to lead to going off sick from work*.”

“I have found the programme *very useful* and *immediately* put some of the exercises/techniques into *my everyday life*, particularly in the *working environment*.”

“During the programme I was *kinder to myself* and better able to *cope with stressful situations at work*.”

“I was able to try to *stay calmer* about things which were worrying me about work. I have *intention* and *motivation* through completing the programme and know that *action is key*. I view some colleagues more *positively* now.”

“Both at home and at work I have *noticed a difference* in how I react to *my emotions* and have not been overwhelmed by them when I was likely to have been previously.”



Recommendation of the Self-Compassion at Work Programme to others:

Participants were asked if they would recommend this programme to colleagues both within their organisation and in other public sector organisations and **92% of respondents said that they would.**

Examples of the verbatim responses regarding recommending this programme to others are:

*"I would **highly recommend** this programme to others. I have learnt a lot about the human experience, and I think that anyone could **benefit** from these teachings."*

*"I would **definitely recommend** this programme. I think this should be offered to **everyone** as part of an organisation's responsibility for **employee welfare and wellbeing**. I think it could be used within team supervision to create a **more caring** atmosphere in my place of work and should form part of appraisals."*

*"Yes absolutely, I think now more than ever with such pressure on employees to always do more for less, **self-compassion should be an absolute priority**."*

*"Given me ability to **support colleagues better**, which is **vital in team-work**."*

*"I would indeed! In the climate we work in these days, it is **very important** to think of having **compassion for yourself** as well, since so much is asked of us in relation to colleagues and other service users, that it's very easy to forget about our own wellbeing."*

*"Yes **definitely**, it is **excellent**. Clearly a lot of effort has been put into the programme and preparation of the webinars, exercises etc."*

*"Yes, I would. It has been **valuable** and has provided some **useful tools**. The format of this course was very flexible and worked well with having a young family."*

*"Definitely, yes. It is **well worth the time**. I shall refer to the notes I have made many times, I am sure."*

Conclusion:

The Self-Compassion at Work Programme appeared to be effective in increasing employees' self-compassion and mental wellbeing and decreasing their perceived stress and burnout. This study shows promise that an affordable and scalable intervention can be effective for employees operating in a significantly challenging environment.

Practitioner Points:

- **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** is a target intervention in the workplace and will be of interest to organisations looking to reach a large workforce
- A four-week online self-guided intervention to develop self-compassion in the workplace offers a flexible, effective and cost saving solution to reducing stress and burnout and improving mental wellbeing for staff
- A busy working population, with no previous experience of self-compassion, may find the intervention accessible and feasible and provide very positive programme evaluations

The Self-Compassion at Work Programme has been specifically designed for all staff across all sectors and can form part of your organisation's Health and Wellbeing strategy. To view **The Self-Compassion at Work Programme** please follow this link:

<http://www.creatingcompassion.com/self-compassion-at-work-programme>
As a cost-saving measure, volume licence options are available.

We also offer **The Compassionate Leadership Coaching Programme** which draws on the empirically tested Self-Compassion at Work Programme and is available to individual leaders on our sector specific open programmes, to selected teams or organisation-wide. This programme can be delivered individually or in small groups. To view **The Compassionate Leadership Coaching Programme** please follow this link:

<http://www.creatingcompassion.com/compassionate-leadership-coaching-programme>

For further information or expressions of interest please contact Dr Amanda Super at amanda@creatingcompassion.com



Dr Amanda Super

Qualifications: Chartered Occupational Psychologist (DOBPpsych), MSc in Occupational Psychology, Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership, BSc Psychology and Health Science

Professional Memberships: Chartered Member approved by The British Psychological Society and Registered member of The Health and Care Professions Council.

Relevant Skills and Experience:

Amanda is a values driven Chartered Occupational Psychologist with her own successful consultancy based in the North West of England. She provides best-practice psychological consultancy and executive coaching services to a wide range of clients, from the public, private and third sectors across the UK. Much of her work over the last two decades has been to develop the leadership attributes and skillsets of senior staff to achieve and fulfil their potential as compassionate leaders of outstanding stature. She works with organisations to develop and maintain compassionate cultures and has developed and delivers a range of innovative, technologically advanced interventions to develop self-compassion in the workplace and compassionate leadership.

Alongside her consultancy work, Amanda is the author of the book, '**A Year of Self-Compassion**' which provides the reader with an opportunity to develop their understanding and practice of self-compassion. Amanda was awarded a Professional Doctorate in Occupational and Business Psychology where her thesis focused on developing self-compassion in the workplace. This has ensured that she is engaged in evidence-based practice and is fully conversant with the most current academic research in her field.

Amanda is regularly asked to present at conferences and events throughout the UK, particularly in relation to developing self-compassion to promote health and wellbeing at work.

You can follow her on Twitter [@DrAmandaSuper](https://twitter.com/DrAmandaSuper)