

Healthcare Under Pressure: Practical Approaches to Strengthen Self-Compassion and Compassionate Leadership



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Introduction

Across the UK healthcare system, the landscape in which staff and leaders operate continues to evolve under significant pressure. Workforce shortages, rising patient demand and increasing system complexity have created environments where healthcare professionals are working at sustained intensity while striving to deliver safe, compassionate care.

In this context, **self-compassion** and **compassionate leadership** are increasingly recognised as important capabilities. Both are supported by a growing body of research demonstrating their relevance to wellbeing, psychological safety and effective team functioning in high-pressure environments (*de Zulueta, 2016; West et al., 2017*).

Drawing on current research and my work with healthcare professionals and leadership teams, this paper considers the challenges facing staff and leaders and offers practical approaches for everyday healthcare practice.

This paper explores:

- the human impact of sustained pressure within healthcare
- why self-compassion can support healthcare professionals working in demanding environments
- the role of compassionate leadership in supporting staff and teams
- practical ways to strengthen self-compassion and compassionate leadership in everyday healthcare practice

The Current Healthcare Context: Pressure and Human Impact

Healthcare professionals often enter the field with a strong commitment to caring for others. However, sustained pressure within healthcare systems can make this work increasingly demanding at both a professional and personal level.

Research shows that healthcare professionals frequently experience high levels of stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout. These experiences have been linked to workload pressures, staffing shortages and the emotional demands inherent in caring professions (*Garcia et al., 2019*).

While these pressures are often discussed in operational or policy terms, the human experience of working within such environments can sometimes be overlooked.

Healthcare professionals may find themselves navigating:

- Emotional fatigue after prolonged periods of intense work
- A sense of responsibility for patients despite limited resources
- Reduced opportunity for recovery between shifts
- Internal pressure to maintain high standards of care
- Self-critical thoughts when situations feel difficult or overwhelming



Over time, these experiences can lead individuals to question their own capacity or resilience, even when the challenges they face are largely systemic.

This is where self-compassion and compassionate leadership offer important grounding.

Why Self-Compassion Matters in Healthcare

Self-compassion involves responding to difficulty with kindness rather than harsh self-criticism, recognising that struggle is a shared human experience and maintaining balanced awareness of one's thoughts and emotions (*Neff, 2003*).

Research consistently shows that self-compassion is associated with lower levels of stress, anxiety and burnout, alongside greater emotional resilience and wellbeing (*MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Dreisoerner et al., 2022*).

Within healthcare settings specifically, compassion-based and mindfulness-informed interventions have been found to improve psychological wellbeing and reduce compassion fatigue among healthcare professionals (*Conversano et al., 2020*).

Importantly, self-compassion is not about lowering professional standards or avoiding responsibility. Instead, it helps individuals respond to difficulty with greater steadiness and perspective.

Self-compassion therefore offers healthcare professionals a practical way to strengthen their capacity to respond to pressure with understanding rather than self-criticism, enabling them to sustain caring work over time.

My own research with healthcare professionals supports this perspective.

A randomised waitlist control trial evaluated a brief online intervention designed to develop self-compassion in healthcare professionals. Participants demonstrated significant improvements in self-compassion and mental wellbeing, together with significant reductions in perceived stress and burnout (*Super et al., 2024*).



These findings suggest that self-compassion is not simply an individual trait, but a capability that can be intentionally developed.

Compassionate Leadership in Healthcare

While self-compassion supports individuals, compassionate leadership plays an equally important role at the organisational level.

Compassionate leadership has been described as a process of attending to others, understanding their experiences, empathising with their challenges and taking thoughtful action to help (*West et al., 2017*).

Within healthcare organisations, compassionate leadership has been linked to improved staff engagement, stronger teamwork and better patient care outcomes (*de Zulueta, 2016*).

Importantly, compassionate leadership does not mean avoiding difficult conversations or lowering expectations. Instead, it shapes how leaders approach challenges and enables them to support staff while maintaining clarity and accountability.

In high-pressure healthcare environments, leaders cannot remove every difficulty their teams face. However, they can influence how those difficulties are experienced. Leaders who listen carefully, communicate openly and respond thoughtfully help create conditions where staff feel supported rather than isolated.

Compassionate leadership can therefore be intentionally strengthened through everyday leadership behaviours that prioritise understanding, collaboration and practical support.

Practical Ways Healthcare Staff Can Strengthen Self-Compassion

Healthcare professionals rarely have time for complex wellbeing strategies during demanding shifts. However, small and realistic practices can help strengthen self-compassion in everyday moments of work.

1. Notice the tone of your inner voice

Many healthcare professionals speak to themselves in ways they would never speak to a colleague. Noticing when self-critical thoughts arise and responding with greater understanding can help reduce unnecessary emotional pressure.

2. Use brief self-compassion pauses

Taking a short pause during difficult moments to acknowledge that a situation is challenging and asking what might be most helpful in that moment can help restore perspective and calm.

3. Recognise common humanity

Reminding ourselves that many colleagues experience similar challenges can reduce feelings of isolation and self-blame.

4. Allow small moments of recovery

Even brief moments of recovery during the day, such as taking a breath between patients, stretching, stepping outside or pausing before the next task, can help reduce cumulative stress.

5. Seek connection with colleagues

Appropriate conversations with trusted colleagues can help normalise difficult experiences and strengthen a sense of shared support.

Practical Ways Leaders Can Strengthen Compassionate Leadership

Leaders in healthcare systems cannot remove every pressure their teams face. However, small leadership behaviours can significantly influence the culture and everyday experience of work.

1. Create space for listening

Regular check-ins with staff about how work is going can help leaders understand emerging challenges and respond early.

2. Acknowledge the emotional realities of healthcare work

Recognising that healthcare work can evoke strong emotions helps normalise staff experiences and reduces stigma around discussing difficulties.

3. Model compassion and healthy boundaries

Leaders who demonstrate steadiness, fairness and self-awareness set a powerful tone for their teams.

4. Reduce avoidable system friction

Compassionate leadership is also practical. Addressing unnecessary administrative burdens, improving communication and responding constructively to staff concerns can significantly improve the daily experience of work.

5. Recognise effort and contribution

Acknowledging the care, effort and professionalism shown by staff can strengthen morale and reinforce shared purpose.

Conclusion: Compassion as a Capability for Healthcare

Healthcare systems across the UK are operating under sustained pressure. In such environments, approaches that recognise both the complexity of the work and the humanity of the workforce are essential.

Self-compassion helps healthcare professionals strengthen their emotional balance and resilience under pressure, while compassionate leadership helps create environments where staff feel valued, supported and able to perform at their best.

Together, self-compassion and compassionate leadership offer practical, evidence-informed approaches to strengthening staff wellbeing, supporting healthier workplace cultures and sustaining the delivery of compassionate, high-quality patient care.

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