

10 Keys to Self-acceptance and inner peace

- **Accept your lack of self-acceptance** – Notice what you say to yourself (e.g Your pathetic!), or the questions you ask yourself (e.g. am I good enough?) that fuel your lack of self-acceptance! Notice how you relate to your experience. Are you often wanting your inner experience to be different, wanting to get rid of, fight or fix unpleasant feelings (e.g anxiety, hurt or sadness), and wanting to hold onto pleasurable ones? In other words, we are often not accepting our experience as it is. We are almost always tinkering with our feelings, picking and choosing what we should feel! We even ***fight our own self-hatred or rejection, which just makes our self-rejection stronger.*** *The first starting place is to notice and accept that you are not accepting yourself, rejecting your own vulnerability, or attacking some part of yourself e.g. a feeling, vulnerability or limitation.* Paradoxically, when we accept our lack of acceptance we immediately begin to relax and let go. This is the first step on the road to self-compassion and acceptance.
- **Know your negativity bias tendencies** – neuroscientists have discovered that we are evolutionarily wired to look for and notice the threats in our world, what is wrong and needs improvement in ourselves or others. Where do you get most hooked into this pattern of noticing what's wrong with yourself or the world? e.g. With your work, your relationships, your parenting, your lifestyle choices, your body, your friendships, your identity? This survival instinct is wired in our primitive brain. Part of this motivation to notice threats is because we naturally want to be safe, in control, accepted and to belong to a group. Hence, we are wired to notice any threats to our belonging and safety. Fears Job is to look for this threat and to avoid or fix it, so as to inhibit our expression and or protect us from loss of belonging or safety. This is very human. However, the more we focus our attention on what's wrong or where the threat is, the more we strengthen those same fear-stress based neural pathways. When you have awareness of your negativity bias's you have more choice to then practice putting your attention on the opposite – Whats good, nurturing and or working for you in your life? The more you put your attention on what supports you, the more your threat perception system starts to relax. A key principle here is “Where you put your attention grows!”
- **Take in the good** – An antidote to the negativity bias is to pay more attention to what gives us pleasure and satisfaction, and to allow this to become absorbed into our awareness and body. When we notice something that opens our heart, touches, supports or gives us pleasure can we stay with this feeling. This is the foundational principle of positive psychology. *When we pay attention to the good, we start to rewire our brain and develop neural pathways that support the development of well being and happiness in the brain circuits.* When these brain circuits develop we start to shift our mood from pessimism to optimism, and ultimately attract more positivity into our lives. Can you practice noticing what can you be grateful for, what you appreciate, o well, and where you feel supported? What can you savour in your life that is pleasurable, soothing, empowering, supportive, caring?
- **Tune into what's universal** – Often our pain is universal. We universally are wired to suffer – e.g. we all grow old, experience loss, shame, get ill, suffer from pain and loss, fear failure, and go through heartache. When we can see the universal fate in our pain we can connect with our common humanity, and this can bring in a sense of compassion and a realization that *we are all 'fellow travellers' sharing a similar existence and set of life challenges.* We can feel less alone. This can take away the sense of 'shame about shame', and the belief that we are the 'only one' going through this kind of suffering. There are probably thousands of other people on this planet

right now that are feeling the same feelings and having the same thoughts and conflicts as you are right now! There is a very powerful Tibetan Buddhist practice called *Tonglen*, which invites us to identify and breath into our suffering and the suffering of all those on this planet who have experienced similar pain to you, and to then, on the out-breath, breath out compassion and good will to yourself and all others.

- **Practice self-compassion** - We can learn to switch from the reptilian brain that's preoccupied with survival (fight, flight and freeze), to the mammalian nurturing and attachment orientated part of the brain (rest, bond and relax) via the simple act of self-compassion. For example, we can touch ourselves in ways that convey self-compassion and evoke feelings of safety, soothing, softening and relaxation in our biology. E.g. Notice what happens when you put one hand on your heart, and one hand on your belly, forehead or back of the neck for a few minutes. Often this exercise evokes oxytocin (which is the hormone that is associated with bonding and self-soothing) and reduces the stress hormones cortisol and adrenalin. It's much more effective to feel safe and motivated from via self-compassion, rather than be run by the inner critic. Doing this self-touch via skin to skin can also be more effective. This communicates directly to our physiology in an instant and profound way that we are caring for ourselves. Then practice saying to yourself kind self-statements – e.g May I be happy, May I forgive myself for being imperfect, May I accept my limitations, May I be kind to myself. As you gently and silently say these statements to yourself, while having your hand on your heart, see what happens in your body. You may notice that you start to soften, relax and feel more self compassion towards your human suffering.
- **Identify and disengage from your 'Inner Critic'** – We often believe we need our inner critic to motivate us towards change and to become 'enough'. We fear that without self-criticism we will stop changing and growing, and become nobody. We also often believe our 'thoughts are facts' and that they tell us who we are. Even though they may feel real, they are not true? What if they are just conditioned stories and sound bites in your head that you hold onto because that is what you know? Ironically, we often hold onto our negative beliefs because deep down we think we need them to feel safe, secure or to recognize ourselves. Do you ever inquire into and question what you tell yourself? Identify your 'supposed too's, shoulds and worst self-judgements. Choose one of the top 3 worst beliefs you tell yourself, write it down and then ask the following questions. *Is it true? How does it effect me when I believe this story? (e.g somatically, emotionally, behaviourally). What is good about believing this thought/story? Who would I be if I stopped believing that thought/story? What would be different in my life?* If you begin to identify and question your self-judgements you can start to dis-identify from them and realize you are far more mysterious, complex and full of potential than any thought can tell you.
- **Turn towards your emotions**– When we stay fully present to our feelings in our body (without going into our minds), by recognizing, naming and allowing them, we often discover that they tend to flow through us in waves, often in a matter of a few minutes. Noticing and naming our feelings gets our frontal lobes on line and calms down the reptilian brain. However, *The practice of staying with our disturbing experience is counter-instinctual*. Our normal and natural instinct is to want to get away from painful feelings and sensations. However, the path of growth involves learning to become aware of and then to '*be present with*' these unpleasant sensations and emotions, to breathe into and hang with them, without getting caught up in any story about them. Can you do the counter-instinctual move to recognize, label, allow

and tolerate the intensity of these painful feelings and sensations, and refrain from any attempt to go into your thoughts about them e.g figuring them out, judging them, fixing or jumping to conclusions about them. Can we sit with the intense wave of our feelings, at the sensation level and let it flow through us. To go one step deeper, listen to the message in your feelings – what are they here to tell you about what you need to feel in more balanced and complete. This is true self-acceptance. True unconditional confidence comes from befriending all of our feelings. If we are not afraid of our feelings, we become unafraid of life, because facing life fully evokes feelings.

- **Take perspective** – Finding a way to step back and see the bigger picture of your situation. Taking perspective about what is happening to you in a wiser, wider, more compassionate, lighter way can make a huge difference to your suffering. Before you jump to any conclusions and take action about a situation, first take perspective and look at the whole situation. It could include - imagining looking at your situation from your future ‘wiser’ self 10 years from now. Could you write a letter or speak from your adult compassionate self, to the part of you that is suffering (e.g the child part)? Can you relate to the suffering part of yourself the way you would to a close friend or a child? If your feeling shame about something, ask yourself what is or was too much or missing in the environment that’s leaving me feeling shamed. Normally we interpret shame as solely about ourselves e.g I am too much or not enough, rather than looking how the environment is or was contributing to our shame through its lack of support.
- **Be a learner**- See what changes in your experience if you treat everything that happens to you as a training moment to receive feedback and learn about yourself. What changes if you hold an attitude that *‘the obstacle is the path’*, that everything that happens to you is an opportunity for becoming more resilient, awake and aware. Your reactions to ‘what happens’ to you can become an opportunity to see what you’re believing, holding onto, pushing away, or protecting in yourself that may not be serving you anymore. Remember, it’s not the events of life that effect you as much as the way you see and respond to them. When we have an attitude of being a learner, we are in the ripe opportunity to listen to our experience so that we can grow in wisdom, discrimination, insight and compassion. We can let go of being the one who should be perfect, the expert, the knower and the accomplished one, and see ourselves as a learner of life who is allowed to make mistakes, to be imperfect, to have a beginners mind and learn. From this place it is a lot easier to navigate life challenges, take action and move forward.
- **Have a daily mindfulness practice** – We brush our teeth everyday to keep them clean and in good health. We can do this for our mind too! By taking time out each day to pause and stop, and pay attention to your moment by moment experience in a mindful way. Mindfulness is *paying attention on purpose to your present moment experience with acceptance*. The more we learn to do this the more our awareness has the chance to relax, open and become spacious enough to include and accept everything without resistance. Your mind becomes like the sky that can include and accept all the weather patterns that pass through it without being threatened or defined by them. Lose your mind and come to your senses regularly during the day! You can do this formally by having a regular meditation practice, or informally via doing yoga, going for walks in nature, having a mindful shower or simply sit on the couch and tune into your immediate experience of thoughts, feelings, sensations and sense perceptions. Research has discovered that having a regular mindfulness practice has been associated with increased capacities in self-compassion, fear regulation,

problem solving, wellbeing, empathy, impulse control, compassion towards others and a better immune system.