**The Three Elements of Self-Compassion**

**Self-kindness:** Self-compassion entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when

we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self- criticism. Self-compassionate people recognize that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties are inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences, rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals. People cannot always be or get exactly what they want. When this reality is denied or fought against, suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration, and self-criticism. When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced.

**Common humanity:** Frustration at not having things exactly as we want them is often

accompanied by an irrational but pervasive sense of isolation — as if “I” am the only person suffering or making mistakes — but all humans suffer. The very definition of being “human” means that one is mortal, vulnerable, and imperfect. Therefore, self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience — something that we all go through, rather than being something that happens to “me” alone. It also means recognizing that personal thoughts, feelings and actions are impacted by “external” factors, such as parenting history, culture, and genetic and environmental conditions, as well as the behavior and expectations of others. Thich Nhat Hahn calls the intricate web of reciprocal cause-and-effect in which we are all imbedded “interbeing.” Recognizing our essential interbeing allows us to be less judgmental about our personal failings. After all, if we had full control over our behavior, how many people would consciously choose to have anger issues, addiction issues, debilitating social anxiety, eating disorders, and so on? Many aspects of ourselves and the circumstances of our lives are not of our choosing but instead stem from innumerable factors (genetic and/or environmental) over which we have little control. By recognizing our essential interdependence, therefore, failings and life’s difficulties do not have to be taken so personally but can be acknowledged with nonjudgmental compassion and understanding.

**Mindfulness:** Self-compassion also requires taking a balanced approach to our negative

emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. This equilibrated stance stems

from the process of relating personal experiences to those of others who are also suffering, thus

putting our own situation into a larger perspective. It also stems from the willingness to observe our negative thoughts and emotions with openness and clarity, so that they are held in mindful

awareness. Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental, receptive mind-state in which one observes thoughts

and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. Mindfulness requires that we not be “over-identified” with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negative reactivity.