



Self-Reflection on the Journey of Becoming a Teacher of Mindful Self-Compassion

By

Steven Hickman, Psy.D.

Christine Braehler, DClínPsy

Christopher Germer, Ph.D.

“If we want to grow as teachers -- we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives -- risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.”

— *Parker J. Palmer*
The Courage to Teach:
Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life

On Becoming a MSC Teacher: A Mountaineer's Guide to Building the Resource of Mindful Self-Compassion

This essay is intended to begin to prepare prospective teachers for the full experience of teaching the MSC program. Prospective teachers are asked to read the piece and write about their reflections on it as part of their formal application to attend teacher training.

In order to make an informed choice about whether MSC Teacher Training is right for you at this time, the following is offered for your consideration:

MSC is primarily designed to build the emotional resource of mindful self-compassion. It is a mindfulness-*based* program – mindfulness is the foundation of self-compassion – but MSC is primarily self-compassion training rather than mindfulness training. In that regard, MSC orients somewhat more toward the suffering “self” rather than the details of moment-to-moment experience. Also, MSC is therapeutic but it isn't traditional therapy insofar as we focus more on resource building rather than on healing old wounds. Old wounds are often healed as we develop the strength to be with ourselves in an openhearted way, but that isn't our primary agenda.

MSC teacher training is a professional training that builds on both personal and professional skills. To eventually teach MSC to others, teachers need to immerse themselves in mindful self-compassion practice and teach from embodied, compassionate presence. Fulfilling the prerequisites for teacher training (such as personal meditation, teaching meditation to others, working with groups) is only the first step of the journey.

On Becoming a Guide

Becoming a mountaineering guide is a good metaphor for MSC teacher training. Imagine you were a novice climber (a prospective MSC participant) and wanted to summit a particularly beautiful and challenging mountain. Your first step would probably be to find a guide. What skills and competencies would you want from a guide to make the trip as safe, comfortable and enjoyable as possible?

First, you might want the guide to accurately describe the nature of the climb. Similarly, MSC teachers should announce their MSC courses so that the expectations of participants match what's being offered (it's a workshop, not a retreat; it's resource-building, not therapy; it's primarily self-compassion training, not mindfulness-training). You may also want a mountaineering guide to understand the fitness level required for the particular climb and to review potential applicants to be sure they can climb together as a group. Likewise, MSC teachers screen potential participants for how well they might fit in a particular MSC course and whether the participants will be able to work together. After the program begins, if it appears that one or two people are struggling or

slipping behind, teachers can specifically address the needs and concerns of those individuals.

A good mountaineering guide will also help their climbers prepare for the journey by suggesting proper equipment - boots, rain gear, snacks, and so forth. Similarly, MSC teachers advise their students to take responsibility for themselves throughout the course itself. They also ensure that support is available once the program has begun, for example, by having a co-teacher or a qualified mental health professional assisting in the program. Other ways of enhancing safety are requesting that participants continue to take any prescription medication, and if they are in psychotherapy, that they consult with their therapist prior to attending MSC.

A mountaineering guide will have the capacity to lead the group in a calm and steady manner through difficult terrain. Should a climber fall and injure him or herself, or experience medical problems, a mountaineering guide uses first aid skills to protect the injured person and also attends to rest of the group. If the guide were to panic, so would the group. An effective mountain guide also knows the limits of his or her ability and has a back-up plan and equipment (such as a satellite phone). Likewise, MSC teachers need to “hold their seat” when participants experience personal distress and, for example, when emotional conflict is directed toward the teacher or the group. MSC teachers know their limits and seek outside support when needed (using emergency contact information, advising professional help). It is rare that mountaineering guides or MSC teachers need to access emergency or back-up procedures but knowing they are available gives everyone a sense of safety and comfort.

As the MSC course progresses, teachers are emotionally attuned to the needs of individual members as well as the group as a whole. Holding individual and group needs in mind, teachers can assess whether to move forward, when to take a break, and how to cover course material in the allotted time. Emotional attunement and time management are important domains of competence for MSC teachers.

Self-understanding is also necessary for mountaineering guides and for MSC teachers in order to deal with the diverse personalities in the group and the changes they go through. Mindful self-compassion activates a sense of safeness associated with the mammalian caregiving system and, paradoxically, may also trigger feelings of unsafeness deriving from one’s early relational experience (“backdraft”). Most course participants go through this process, but teachers may do as well so they need to know their own vulnerabilities to guide others safely along the path.

A key aspect of teaching MSC is to teach from personal experience and embodied presence. This capacity inspires a sense of trust in the group just as a guide who has climbed Mt. Everest and Kilimanjaro might inspire confidence in their tour participants. However, just as a competent guide may be able to scale tall mountains in sandals (think Sherpas!), less experienced climbers probably need more support. Therefore, MSC teachers must be ready to be *teachers* whose main task is to understand the needs and struggles of other people and to help them along the way. Some MSC Teacher Training candidates want to become MSC teachers to deepen their own practice but MSC Teacher Training is really designed to teach others.

Mountaineering guides are especially delightful leaders when they have knowledge of the geology, plants and animals on the mountain. This kind of information is precious but obviously insufficient to lead others up a mountain. Similarly, it's important for MSC teachers to have a solid understanding of the theory and practice of MSC, but such information alone is not enough to lead people on an inner, emotional journey through tricky terrain. Again, we need to be focused on the needs of our students and have some capacity to accompany and support them on the path.

Mountain guides know very well that someone who wants to climb a mountain will not be happy with a walk in the park. Their group wants a challenge. However, guides can't leave their group exhausted at the end of each day and dreading the next leg of their journey. While teaching MSC, maintaining a balanced emotional tone is important for effective teaching – balancing contact with positive and negative experience. Trying to keep the atmosphere too pleasant may lead to “sugar-coating” difficult emotions and focusing too much on emotional pain will overwhelm and demoralize course participants.

It requires courage and skill to invite participants to share difficult experiences that arise in their practice. Ultimately, these conversations are the most transformational as participants learn to meet seemingly impossible, old conflicts in a new way. If we seek and validate only positive experiences, we risk alienating members of the group who are already bumping up against important obstacles. The arising of challenges, resistances and even a sense of disillusionment as actually a clear indication that we are teaching MSC, not that the teaching is failing! However, it's also important to know that we don't need to be continually oriented toward emotional pain. Lighthearted humor, casual stories, and cultivating simple connections between participants helps everyone to re-engage emotional pain later on.

At the end of the day, the choice to embark on the path to self-compassion belongs to the participant, and the pace, the challenges, and the fruits of practice are in the hands of the participant. MSC teachers commit themselves to be knowledgeable companions, inspiring, comforting, nourishing, and supporting each person along the way.

Prospective MSC teachers are encouraged to reflect on what you've just read, notice your reactions to the content of this essay, and determine your own readiness to teach MSC at this time. Teaching MSC is itself a beautiful journey, but a rather different one than practicing MSC for oneself. If you decide to take the next step, you will be asked to share your reflections (only 1-2 paragraphs) as part of the application process.

*With warmest wishes,
The MSC Teacher Training Team*