Be kind to yourself

Many people feel ashamed, inadequate, not 'good enough', or even a complete failure because they cannot have children. People may feel that their bodies have failed them, or they may feel that they failed in some way by not pursing one last opportunity or treatment that would have resulted in achieving pregnancy. They may also attribute their inability to have children to something they did earlier in life.

The reality is that we are all imperfect, and it is part of our human experience to feel shame, insecurity and inadequacy. It is part of our nature not to like our whole selves. Indeed, we tend to be more critical towards ourselves than towards others, such as friends. Sometimes we get so focused on our negatives that we forget our qualities and strengths. It is important to refocus our attention to regain a more balanced view.

In this activity[i], we will ask you to act towards yourself as you would act towards a close friend or a relative, that is, to look at yourself through the eyes of an unconditionally loving friend.

Let's practice

Try writing about your unfulfilled desire for children and the role that you think you might have played in it. What emotions come up when you think about this? How do these emotions take place in your body? Try to feel your emotions exactly as they are – no more, no less – and then write about them.

Now, think about an imaginary friend who is unconditionally loving, accepting, kind and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see your strengths and all your weaknesses, including those aspects of yourself that you just wrote about. Reflect about what this friend feels about you. This friend understands your life history and all that has contributed to create you as you are in this moment: your genes, family history, life circumstances, the things that are in and out of your control.

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, focusing on the negative aspects that you tend to see in yourself. What would this friend tell you about your 'flaws' or 'weaknesses' from the perspective of unlimited compassion? What would this friend say about the pain you feel when you judge yourself? What would this friend say to remind you that you are just a human being, as everyone else, fragile and with both strengths and weaknesses?

As you write to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, try to infuse your letter with a strong sense of acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness. Try to do it in a compassionate way, understanding the suffering but also cultivating a desire to do something to alleviate it.

After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you like a cool breeze on a hot day. We are all entitled to love and acceptance. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

To do at home

You can repeat this exercise as many times you want and feel you are finding new things to tell yourself. You can also try keeping a daily self-compassion journal for one week (or longer if you like). Journaling is an effective way to express emotions, and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. For instance, perhaps you felt sad because your friends told you they were pregnant and bad because your pain overcame your ability to feel happy for them. Try to look at each event through the eyes of your unconditionally loving imaginary friend.

[i] Adapted from www.self-compassion.org website, by Dr. Kristin Neff.