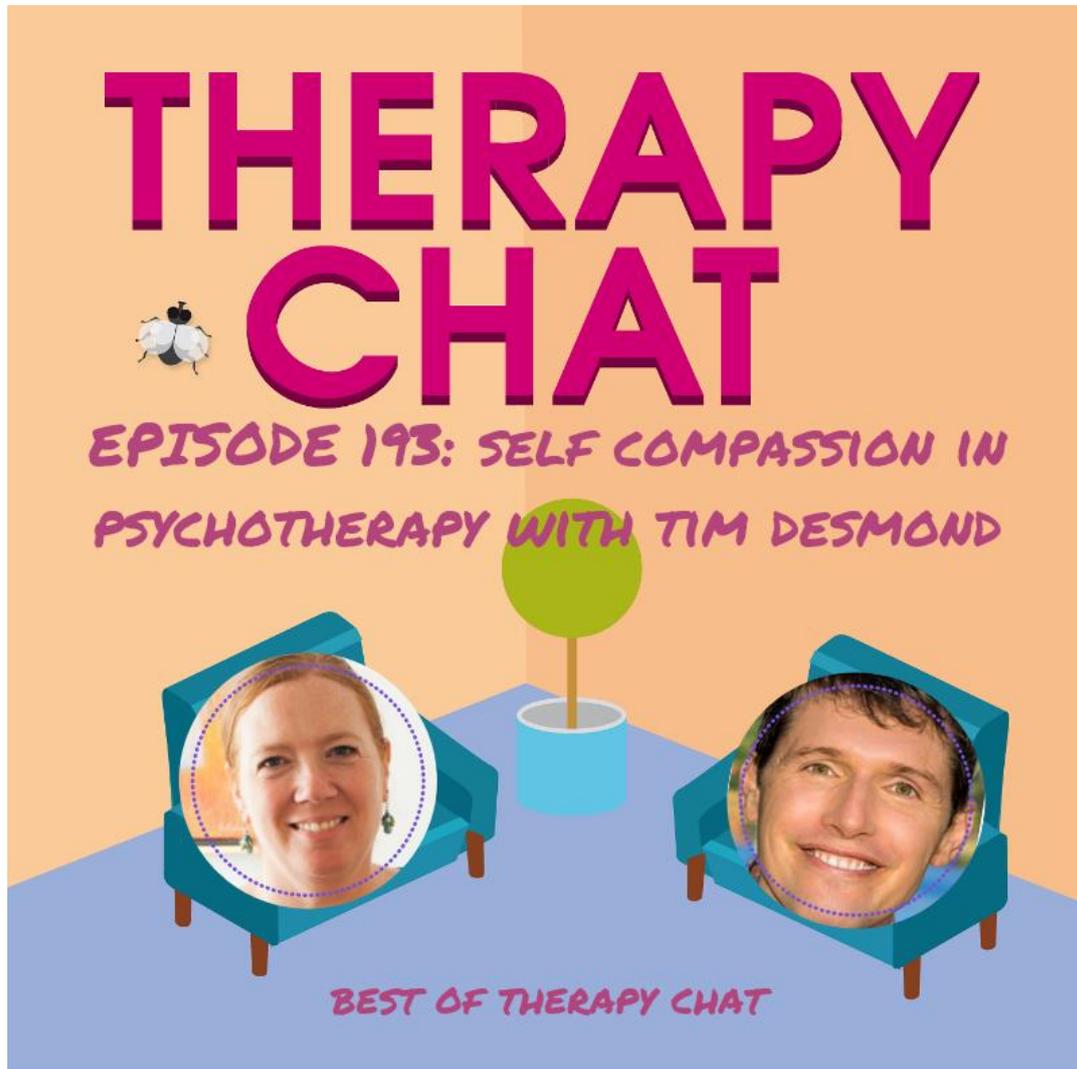


# Therapy Chat Episode 193



[00:00:00] **Laura Reagan:** Therapy chat Podcast, Episode 193.

[00:00:05] **Announcer:** This is the Therapy Chat podcast with Laura Reagan, LCSW-C. The information shared in this podcast is not a substitute for seeking help from a licensed mental health professional. And now here's your host, Laura Reagan, LCSW-C.

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code: "Therapy Chat" when you sign up for a free trial at [www.therapynotes.com](http://www.therapynotes.com).

[00:01:08] Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat. Today's replay episode is one of my favorites. I interviewed someone who is an expert on self-compassion, Tim Desmond. I hope you'll enjoy our discussion and please contact me via SpeakPipe by going to [therapychatpodcast.com](http://therapychatpodcast.com) and clicking on the SpeakPipe button to send me a message. I'd love to know what you think. Thanks so much for listening.

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[00:01:55] Welcome back to Therapy Chat. Today my guest is Tim [00:02:00] Desmond, LMFT, who is a student of Thich Nhat Hahn, and an expert in self-compassion.

[00:02:08] Tim, welcome, and thank you so much for being on Therapy Chat Today.

[00:02:12] **Tim Desmond:** I'm glad to be here.

[00:02:13] **Laura Reagan:** I'm really glad too. I'm so excited to have you talk more about self-compassion in your work. I think it's gonna be really fascinating for the audience. So can you start off just telling more about yourself and your work?

[00:02:26] **Tim Desmond:** Sure. I'll start from the beginning. I grew up in Boston. I grew up with a single alcoholic mom, had a lot of financial issues growing up. We were homeless for a while when I was a teenager. And so by the time I got to college, I had a lot of anger and sadness and loneliness and it was in college that I was first introduced to the teachings of Thich Nhat Hahn. It was actually a political science class. [00:03:00] His book Peace is Every Step was assigned in that class. And when I read it, what I saw was exactly what was missing from my life, the practices of mindfulness, of self-compassion. And what I found was the more that I put these practices and these teachings, the more that I put them into practice in my own life, just the more peacefulness and happiness and feelings of connection that, that I experienced.

[00:03:30] And so as 19 year olds are sometimes known to do, I found something that worked for me and I just completely dove into it. And so kind of from then on, I spent as much time and continue to spend as much time as I can studying with Thich Nhat Hahn in Plum Village, the monastery where he lives in France in whe when he tours, [00:04:00] at the different monasteries Blue Cliff Monastery in New York or Deer Park Monastery near San Diego.

[00:04:08] And a couple years ago, I left Oakland, California with a couple of friends who were a former monk and nun that, that had lived with him. We founded a mindfulness retreat center called Morning Sun Mindfulness Center in Southern New Hampshire. And so I moved here, where, I'm at right now it's a Morning Sun Mindfulness Center and have been living here kind of building a new practice space and community for the past couple years.

[00:04:42] **Laura Reagan:** Wow. So do you have your psychotherapy practice there at the mindfulness center?

[00:04:49] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah, mainly here. I also work with people kind of all over the world. So sometimes distance, sometimes people come here, it's kind of a mix.

[00:04:59] **Laura Reagan:** [00:05:00] That's really interesting. I heard you speak at your workshop at Psychotherapy Networker just a couple weeks ago, as you know, and I loved it. I was already using self-compassion in my work with clients and have wanted to learn more about it and I've read some, but I started reading your book and it really goes into depth about the brain science related to self-compassion and mindfulness.

[00:05:28] **Tim Desmond:** Mm-hmm.

[00:05:29] **Laura Reagan:** And I think some people don't understand that this is scientifically based, even though it's an ancient practice.

[00:05:37] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah.

[00:05:38] **Laura Reagan:** So I was really interested in the explanation in your book of the dual process theory. Can you talk about that and how it relates to self-compassion?

[00:05:47] **Tim Desmond:** Oh, sure. Well so dual process theory is a theory from cognitive science. The best place to learn more about it is Dan Connaman's book Thinking [00:06:00] Fast and Slow. Basically, cognitive scientists have

come to understand that there are two different kind of modes of cognitive processing that people have. And they call them system one and system two. So system one is our automatic effortless processing. It's the cognitive processing that where you can determine is one object closer than another? If I say two plus two equals just pops right up those kinds of things that don't require any effort.

[00:06:39] And the majority of our cognitive processing is in that style system. System two refers to the types of cognitive processing that requires some effort, that require us what we would tend to say is that actually make us think. And in my book, I talk about some of the ways that this kind of [00:07:00] understanding applies to developing mindfulness and self compassion. One of the most important ones that I'd wanna mention here is that as we're wanting to, when we learn a new skill, whenever we learn any type of new skill, it requires effort initially. If we're learning a new musical instrument, if we're learning how to speak a new language, when we're first beginning, it requires effort in order to be able to do it.

[00:07:30] It feels a little awkward. It feels unnatural, and it requires that sort of system two type of processing and with any skill with enough practice, it begins to feel more automatic. Begins to feel more natural and it begins to feel and it begins to be something that system one learns how to do on its own.

[00:07:53] One analogy that I really like is about learning a new language. So if you were wanting to [00:08:00] learn to speak German, when you go to your first German class, it's going to require a lot of kind of system two cognitive effort, just to be able to remember the words and try to use them. But if you practice enough, then what you'll find is that eventually you develop some fluency and that you can speak German, that someone can just ask you a question and you just respond.

[00:08:26] It's something that now is an automatic system one process. And so it's the same way with developing mindfulness and self-compassion. In that when we first begin these practices, we can benefit from them right away, but it takes a little while it takes a certain amount of practice before they start to feel natural before they start to become more of a part of who you are and before it starts to be your automatic response to difficulty or problems in your life.

[00:09:00]

[00:09:00] What we learned through cognitive science is that the main mediator, if you want mindfulness and self-compassion to become something that feels more natural to become something that is your automatic response in moments of difficulty, the main mediator is practice is how much kind of time and energy

have we put into practicing these skills and it's through practice that we end up being able to create new habits.

[00:09:31] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. So understanding that the thing that is so difficult and takes up so much energy when you're first learning it can become automatic with enough practice to me is really hopeful because I know a lot of my clients, I mainly work with people who've experienced childhood trauma, usually related to abuse.

[00:09:54] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah.

[00:09:54] **Laura Reagan:** And when trying to do mindfulness, sometimes they feel [00:10:00] frustrated that they find it difficult to detach from their thoughts and accessing self-compassion can also feel too hard sometimes. For some people it's easier and some it's harder, but knowing that there's scientific proof that if you practice, it will become easier. And conventionally become automatic is really reassuring.

[00:10:25] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah. Richard Davidson is one of the most kind of highly respected neuroscientists who studies emotion and one thing his main talking point lately has been trying to communicate to people that wellbeing, that compassion, that gratitude, these should be understood as skills that we can develop rather than something intrinsic about who we are or our personality. And one of the reasons that I think that's really important [00:11:00] is because probably most of your clients know if you were talking about learning a musical instrument or learning to speak in other language, the expectation would be, yeah, it's hard at first. And then you start to get it.

[00:11:15] But for a lot of us, when we're trying to practice mindfulness or self-compassion, when we're going through that kind of initial hard stage, it's like, oh, I'm not good at this. I can't do it. It's not who I am. And I think that's the, that's a mistaken view that can make it harder to develop these qualities.

[00:11:38] **Laura Reagan:** Yes, I agree. I do hear people say I can't do it.

[00:11:42] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah.

[00:11:43] **Laura Reagan:** and I understand that there are a lot of barriers, but it's just, like I said, it's reassuring knowing that everyone can do it with practice.

[00:11:52] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah.

[00:11:53] **Laura Reagan:** So how do you see you gave a pretty compelling description of your early [00:12:00] years in that brief little explanation about your life. How do you see the difference that self-compassion has made for you?

[00:12:07] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah, I mean, honestly, I really feel like I owe just about everything good in my life to the practices that I've learned from Thich Nhat Hahn. I feel like I've went from someone which with a lot of anger and self destructiveness to someone who has a lot of peace that who's in touch with more peace and joy and connection than I would've thought possible. And really in my life, I think I was giving a talk just yesterday in Providence, Rhode Island and someone asked, what are the kind of qualities or conditions that kind of make it easier to be able to benefit from these practices?

[00:12:58] And for me, [00:13:00] I attribute a lot of, how I've been able to benefit from these practices to one, the good fortune of being around good teachers. And then two, when I find something that is helpful for me, I really dedicate myself to it. I kind of do it wholeheartedly. And so, the difference that self-compassion has made in my life? Well, it's interesting. I've been thinking lately about self-compassion as having four different types or sort of there being kind of four different types of self-compassion or forms that it can take. The first one is that we motivate ourselves with kindness instead of criticism. And I think that might be sort of maybe one of the most basic forms of self-compassion in the sense that so many of us engage in self-criticism to motivate ourselves, to try to do [00:14:00] better, but researchers like Kristin Neff and other people who are studying self-compassion have demonstrated that people who motivate themselves compassionately are actually able to achieve more and particularly are able to persevere through difficulties, much better than people who motivate themselves with criticism.

[00:14:22] So it's kind of like a client once phrased it. It's like learning how to be my own cheerleader instead of being my own slave driver. Because one of the biggest dangers of motivating ourselves with criticism is that how it works is that we begin to fear failure and that when you fear failure often, then you start to avoid situations where you might fail.

[00:14:50] And so many of us end up in situations where we don't want to try something new because we're afraid of our inner critic. And so being able [00:15:00] to motivate ourselves, encourage ourselves with compassion is one element. Another important element of self-compassion is being able to, have self-compassion in difficult moments in life.

[00:15:15] So, if something unfortunate is happening in your life, whenever we're going through a hard time, one of the things that we want most is a caring, compassionate friend to be able to listen to us and kind of offer support and through self-compassion, we're able to have an internal kind of an internalized voice that we can be present for ourselves. We can listen and we can offer that support, but then self-compassion can go deeper than that.

[00:15:48] Self-compassion practices can be used to heal pain and trauma from the past. And that's one of the main focuses in my book is [00:16:00] looking at how we can use explicit compassion training practices and incorporate them into work with trauma or work with other sort of pain and suffering from our pasts.

[00:16:14] And then I believe that possibly the most transformative element of self-compassion is learning how to have compassion for every part of ourselves. Not just the ones that we like, but actually learning how to interact with or to relate to the parts of ourselves that maybe we wish would change, the parts that we have a hard time with to relate to those parts of ourselves, with compassion as well.

[00:16:42] And so in terms of the impact of self-compassion on my life, I feel like self-compassion is not just about trying to improve your self talk, that it can go deeper than that into being a real, powerful set of skills for healing suffering from the [00:17:00] past and for befriending and learning how to create a more compassionate relationship with all of the different parts of ourselves. Instead of these conflicts that we all experience.

[00:17:14] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah, that's so powerful because when we have within us, what we need to soothe ourselves and comfort ourselves in hard times, it's not that you don't need connection with other people, but you don't have to look outside of yourself to find relief when you're suffering.

[00:17:34] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah. Yeah and being able to develop that internal source of compassionate presence. In some ways when we think about psychotherapy, we think about the client bringing their distress and the therapist, one of the main things that the therapist brings is their compassionate presence. And so when we can develop an internal source of compassionate presence, it can be [00:18:00] incredibly supportive and transformative.

[00:18:02] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah, that is very healing. So one of the things I love about your book and I haven't finished it, but you have practical techniques for therapists to use in your book *Self-compassion and Psychotherapy*, with

basically transcripts of what I guess you've done in sessions and what you would say, what the client would say and how it would work. I think that's really helpful.

[00:18:32] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah. What I wanted to make sure that in putting all of these vignettes. So my, yeah, my book is mainly structured around vignettes because I feel like in any of these practices that generally showing is better than telling and that so much of my own journey has been taking what I've learned from Thich Nhat Hahn and been able to apply in my own life.

[00:18:59] [00:19:00] And developing ways to share that with others, to share that with my clients and to be able to guide people through practices, the way that I would practice myself. And you need different forms as a therapist than in a retreat center, because we don't have our clients for 12 hours a day for 10 days in a row.

[00:19:24] And most of our clients don't have kind of the patience or the perseverance necessarily to stick with a practice for months and months until it starts to really kind of click and make sense to them in the way that so many meditation students do.

[00:19:46] **Laura Reagan:** Mm.

[00:19:46] **Tim Desmond:** So one of the things that I developed was what I call dialogue based mindfulness, which is basically guiding people through these sorts of practices, mindfulness and self-compassion practices [00:20:00] while getting verbal feedback from the client about their experience.

[00:20:05] Because I find that it's so much easier to guide somebody into a practice in a way that really works for them in a way that, that, that actually clicks for them when I know what obstacles are coming up for them or when they're sharing with me, what their experience is rather than sort of the more traditional way of doing these guided practices, where the client is silent until the end, and then they just kind of give feedback.

[00:20:35] So I've developed a few kind of skills that I write about in Self-compassion and Psychotherapy that I believe make it a lot easier for clients to benefit from these types of practices. And then I describe using lots of different clinical examples, what it actually looks like when you're working with clients.

[00:20:59] **Laura Reagan:** [00:21:00] I think that's really helpful and I'm pretty eager to get to that part of the book. So I can integrate that myself into my

practice because I do the meditations and get the feedback at the end, like you said, but not that questioning process as it's happening. So I think that's really helpful.

[00:21:20] What do you think about the importance of the therapists working on developing their own self-compassion when they use self-compassion practices with clients. Yeah. Do you feel like it's necessary or not?

[00:21:34] **Tim Desmond:** Well necessary, that wouldn't be how I'd frame it because necessary, there are plenty of people who use mindfulness and self-compassion with their clients, and they don't have a formal practice in their own lives and their clients who do benefit.

[00:21:51] But what I would suggest and encourage for therapists is basically to say that there are two really [00:22:00] important benefits that we can experience using these practices in our own lives. And the first one is that it makes it easier to find compassion for our own clients, especially the difficult ones.

[00:22:13] There's a client that I write about in the book. One, one of my first clients, when I was still in my practicum was a young woman who was, she said she was dating a really nice guy. He was nice to her and funny and had a good job. And that she was cheating on him with an artist who was addicted to crack, who kept stealing money from her. And what I noticed, I was like, my internal response was just like, stop it like just don't do that.

[00:22:39] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah.

[00:22:40] **Tim Desmond:** And, but at this point I had been studying meditation for several years and was aware that I wasn't feeling compassion for her in that moment. And for me, that was a real red flag. So I bit my lip and got through the session the best I could. But then when I went home, I sat down on my little cushion and I [00:23:00] pictured this client and I felt all of the tension and kind of agitation come up in my body. And I'm sure everyone who's listening to this now, I'm sure that you have at least one client that if you pictured them right now, you'd notice some tension kind of come up in your body. And so I just gave myself some time and space to feel that tension, that agitation, just whatever came up in my body without trying to change it, to send myself compassion and saying it's okay for you to feel this.

[00:23:29] And as the thought started coming up I just wish people wouldn't act like this. I wish people wouldn't do this. I sent myself compassion and said it's

all right for you to wish that, of course you wish that. And as I settled and began to feel more peaceful, I recognized that in some ways she was reminding me of some people from my own life who had made bad choices and caused a lot of suffering for themselves and others.

[00:23:53] And so I went back to different moments in my own life and sent myself compassion there. [00:24:00] And after practicing like this for a while, it was probably about 90 minutes that eventually I was feeling really peaceful and really calm. And when I visualized my client again, I saw her completely differently.

[00:24:16] I saw how out of control she felt. And I saw that she didn't like the choices that she was making, and that's why she came into therapy. And for whatever reason, I couldn't see that so clearly because I needed to send myself compassion first. So that being, I was able to kind of open my heart to this person in a fuller way after practicing self-compassion for myself.

[00:24:45] And the other thing that the other benefit that we gain is more confidence and kind of comfort with these practices. Thich Nhat Hahn has given a couple of retreats for psychotherapists in the past. And one of the things that he'll say is [00:25:00] your own suffering is your best teacher.

[00:25:03] And I believe that's really true that as a therapist. As therapists, we all experience anxiety. We all experience frustration and anger we all know what it's like to feel hopeless sometimes. And if we can learn to bring acceptance and compassion to ourselves in those moments to kind of befriend ourselves in those moments and really to embrace those feelings like you're holding a crying baby.

[00:25:33] Then, what we find is working with clients, when our clients bring those same issues, those same experiences, we just feel a lot more comfortable and a lot more confident that it's possible to move through these things that we don't feel kind of this, our own anxiety that we need to make these, this distress go away, that we know that we can stay present with it. And that it's just part of life.

[00:25:58] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah, that's very [00:26:00] powerful. And I must say, I know Thich Nhat Hahn has had a stroke and I don't know if he's still doing this, but if they still offer retreats for psychotherapists, I think that's something that I know I would want to know more about. Do you know how to find information about that?

[00:26:17] **Tim Desmond:** Yeah he suffered a stroke about a year and a half ago. He was in a coma for several months. He was actually in rehabbing in the hospital for many months. And now he's back home in Plum Village in France. But he's getting around. He can move around a little bit. He's happy, but he's not speaking. So it's looking like he probably won't be leading more retreats, but retreats for therapists. I think that yeah, that there are lots of wonderful Dharma teachers out there [00:27:00] who are offering retreats for therapists and at Morning Sun Mindfulness Center we offer retreats for the public here as well.

[00:27:09] So if people are looking to go on a retreat, then I feel like that's one of the best ways to, especially when you're beginning to make these practices kind of part of your life. I think about meditation retreats kind of like having an immersion experience when you're learning a language that you have this sort of an immersion into the practice and that in a short time you notice a lot of benefits. And then when you go back to your sort of practice on your own in, in your life, in your daily life, it just feels a little easier. It feels a little more natural. If you've been able to have even a day, but if possible, a few days.

[00:27:57] I guess I'll share two things. So [00:28:00] morningsuncommunity.org is the website for our mindfulness center. And then the other thing that, that I'll mention for people who are not going to travel up to New Hampshire, I just launched a 12 week online course in self-compassion that's for a general public. And if you go to timdesmond.net, you can find that course there. so at timdesmond.net, there's a 12 week online course called the foundations of self-compassion that people can explore as well. There's a seven day free trial, so you can kind of test it out and see if it speaks to you.

[00:28:41] **Laura Reagan:** I'm so glad you mentioned that because I was going to ask you about it and that's for the general public, including therapists, right?

[00:28:48] **Tim Desmond:** Including therapists. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:28:50] **Laura Reagan:** Great. Your book, your clinical course sounds wonderful. Your book is really great. I also noticed it's great that you have a free trial, [00:29:00] but I noticed that your course is priced very affordably relative to what a lot of things like that would be. So, yeah, that's exciting. I'm definitely gonna be doing the trial and check it out.

[00:29:10] **Tim Desmond:** Great.

[00:29:11] **Laura Reagan:** Well, I'm mindful of your time. So I want to thank you so much for being on the podcast today. I thought this was a really

interesting talk and I think that our listeners are going to want to find out a lot more about everything you're doing.

[00:29:26] **Tim Desmond:** Well thank you, Laura, and it was really great to talk with you too.

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