



WOMEN CONNECTED IN WISDOM

*Stories and Resources Rooted in the
8 Dimensions of Wellness*

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Glossary

EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELLNESS

“Self-Care is tending. Being actively involved in a caring role creates the potential for taking on other people’s tensions and stress. . . .By tending to ourselves, we learn to let go quickly so that we are free to experience a life of balance and vitality.”

—SHEILA K. COLLINS, PHD, AND
CHRISTINE GAUTREAUX, MSW



DISCOVER YOUR INNER ALLY AND SOOTHE YOUR SOUL

Dr. Cynthia L. Phelps

As moments of enlightenment go, it was a pretty nerdy one. You see, I was reading about an emerging body of research. The topic was self-compassion, the idea that you could show yourself the same kindness and support you would give to a dear friend. Somehow, through the fog of my suffering, I instantly recognized that this was what would save me.

Compassion is the recognition of suffering in others and the desire to alleviate it. It is a natural human response and has played a key role in helping humans form strong relationships and communities. It is recognized as key in the major world religions and is a core concept of the golden rule.

But what I was reading about self-compassion was blowing my mind. People with high levels of self-compassion are more productive, more creative, have better relationships, and reported higher levels of well-being. In addition, these folks experienced less depression, less stress and anxiety, and eventually, less addiction.¹

Why did I need saving? I was stuck in an inner struggle. Even as I fully understood that I had a problem with drinking, I was unwilling to admit that I couldn't fix it. That's an excellent recipe for suffering. If you've ever been at the mercy of an addiction or any other unhelpful compulsive behavior, you will recognize this pain.

I'd already been to rehab four years prior. There I learned the logistics of recovery and how to set up my life, my home, and my relationships to be alcohol-free. The problem was, it did not really address my inner core problem: shame. I was ashamed to have a drinking problem. I was ashamed to be divorced. I was ashamed that I lost my job. I was ashamed of wasting so much of my precious life suffering.

So, when I read about self-compassion, it was as if the clouds parted and there was a ray of hopeful sunlight shining down on me. I had found what would save me.

I dove in and started learning, because I wanted ALL the things this research promised me. I desperately wanted to set down my suffering and be free. It was not long before I was taking classes in self-compassion and developing my own practice, and eventually I became trained in a research-based method to help others raise their levels of self-compassion.

While I was on this journey to bring more compassion to my own suffering, I had another moment of clarity when my teacher modeled self-compassion. She recalled a time when she was feeling some particularly difficult emotions. She was feeling shamed, frustrated, and sad. That day, she stopped, put her hand on her heart, and spoke aloud her inner ally for the class to hear. “Oh darling, I’m so sorry you are going through this difficult experience,” she said in the sweetest and most soothing tone of voice. Immediately, I pictured a grandmother speaking these words to her. Then and there, the InnerAllies were born—a set of characters to gently guide you to speak to yourself with compassion.

Although I intellectually knew I should speak to myself compassionately, I fundamentally didn’t understand how to do it. If I’m being honest, I didn’t really believe I had permission to speak to myself in that manner. Being your own Inner Ally is more than a written exercise on a worksheet; it is true, heartfelt words of compassion delivered to yourself in a moment of suffering.

This moment of clarity around the inner language of self-compassion birthed a flurry of problem-solving for me that eventually became the evidence-based practices on which my company, InnerAlly, is built upon.

The premise is very simple. Speak to yourself in a kind and supportive way, especially when you are suffering. In practice, however, I found there were many things that could get in the way of practicing compassionate self-talk. These include:

- Not feeling worthy of kindness and compassion
- Thinking you are being selfish or narcissistic by speaking this way
- Feeling that this type of self-talk makes you weak

- Being worried that these kind words will somehow make you lose your motivation and become lazy or indulgent

Luckily, the research into self-compassion directly dismisses each of these worries as false. Even if Inner Ally language feels awkward, scary, or wrong, it is the most direct path to practice self-compassion and receive the amazing benefits it promises.

If you are stuck in struggle, now is the time to listen to your inner ally. Using mindfulness, begin to monitor your inner ally on a regular basis and jot down what it is saying. You may notice an inner critic who is always unsatisfied with your performance, or an inner bully who calls you names when you fail or make a mistake, or an inner ally of fear that comes up when you're ready to begin creating. Ask yourself if your inner ally is serving you. Or are you holding yourself back with it—or worse, punishing yourself with it?

The inner ally IS your relationship with yourself. You can change your life by using your inner ally to be more compassionate to yourself. You deserve to reap the benefits of self-compassion, to avoid depression, anxiety, and addictions. Your inner ally is your superpower to be able to comfort and soothe yourself during difficult times, motivate you to do the work you are meant to do, and celebrate your wins.

You don't have to go it alone. You can use the wise and gentle guidance of the InnerAllies to help you rewrite your inner language. Find out who *your* InnerAlly is by taking the quiz at InnerAlly.com—and if you are ready to make this a daily practice, consider purchasing the InnerAlly Card Deck so you are never alone on this inner journey.

DR. CYNTHIA L. PHELPS



Dr. Cynthia L. Phelps is an international speaker, certified mindfulness instructor, and the founder of InnerAlly, a company that builds evidence-based tools to improve mental wellness. She has extensive experience in learning and behavior change and has been developing mental health technologies, such as online courses and mobile apps, since 2009. Her background as a researcher in neuroscience helps her create effective programs and products that not only improve mental health but also soothe the soul. Phelps started InnerAlly after having a profound recovery experience through implementing self-compassion in her own life, and now she teaches and offers personal and group coaching to help others make their own breakthroughs. To fill out the intake form, sign up for a class, or join the community, visit her website.

You can connect with Cynthia at www.innerally.com.

¹ Phelps, C. L., Paniagua, S. M., Willcockson, I. U., & Potter, J. S. (2018). The relationship between self-compassion and the risk for substance use disorder. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, *183*, 78-81.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2017.10.026>.

EMBRACE ALL OF WHO YOU ARE

Tracy W. Reese

I've been artistically inclined from a young age. But like many, I never viewed myself as an artist, and I struggled to connect with my authentic self. Even from as early as eight years old, from what I can recall, my life began to paint some painful hues. Refusing to adopt stereotypes and statistical labels, I moved forward with my life as the daughter of a drug-addicted father, an unwed teenage mother, a survivor of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, divorce. These and a myriad of other hues forced my God-given gifts and passions to the background.

Nearly thirty years would pass with me trying to navigate life. Other instances of trauma, disappointment, fear, and even desperation acted as my most pronounced informers. My ability to establish a solid sense of self diminished, and I became numb emotionally. I now understand the term for what I experienced is *dissociation*. The Mayo Clinic describes *dissociation* as “a disconnection and lack of continuity between thoughts, memories, surroundings, actions and identity.”² Yet I was making an array of life-defining choices. Decisions about bringing life into this world or not, whom I would marry and befriend, where to live, what jobs to take or leave, and significant financial decisions. I was attempting to craft a life that looked redeeming. There were many fleeting moments where I could feel joy rising, and life's challenges did not feel prevalent. However, in hindsight, my capacity to consistently invest well was skewed. I used external validations to measure my success and wellness. I trusted that if I could say or do the “right” thing, look a certain way, it was an indicator that I was good or maybe even healed. Despite all my efforts to gain and maintain my footing, there were significant voids.

I had not yet discovered the necessary and life-giving components of emotional wellness and the value of authentic expression, even though they

were both calling me and willing to be patient with me as I found my way. For me, authenticity is about connecting with ourselves deeply and being genuine and true to that when we express ourselves. It means acting according to our beliefs and feelings without pretending to be someone or something we are not. So, you can understand it when I tell you the way that I functioned was the antithesis of authenticity.

Something happened before my thirty-eighth birthday that would become the ultimate course corrector. My marriage had unraveled in what felt like an instant. For validation, the man and relationship I had come to depend on most were no longer available to serve me in ways they were never intended. I'd spent most of my life, including the eighteen years with this man, conforming and avoiding creating safety and comfort. I couldn't see it clearly then, but I now identify some of my behaviors as manipulative or controlling.

On the day he left, I sat alone at the bottom of the stairs in our home, sobbing from the deepest part of my soul. This was the same place he and I sat six years prior (as the house was being built), envisioning our future together. Regardless, now he was gone. As I tried to make sense of it all, there was one question that kept surfacing: "How did I get here?" This was not a rhetorical question. There was a determination to understand my circumstances independent of his choice.

I sat with my tear-stained journal on my lap one Wednesday afternoon. I was exhausted from the grief when suddenly, there was a moment of piercing clarity. Not only had I lost him, but more significantly, and long before this, I had lost myself. My inability to connect with my emotions and express myself authentically had created an imbalance in me, in what I attracted to me, and in the way I experienced the world around me. This discovery was devastating, but a fantastic opportunity was resting beside the ruins.

Self-reconciliation: It was time for me to finally meet me.

There was a blank canvas waiting for a silenced artist to CREATE (Courageously Release Expression Authentically To Elevate). So, I began a fierce fight to work through mountains of fears, doubts, and defenses that had developed into apathy and reduced my ability to connect deeply with self, God, and others.

The journey toward healing has displayed a constant tension as I've learned to embrace stillness, unmask, and not run from the range of

experiences, emotions, and behaviors that shaped me. My tendency to use food, people, shopping, alcohol, sex, or pornography would have to be replaced by life-giving habits. Art, my faith, and therapy became my lifelines. Not only did they lead to healing and unleash my innermost expressions, but I also experienced a greater source of confidence that revealed my deeper purpose and a greater sense of direction.

Five Key Components of Transformation

I was informed and transformed by my artistic creations in powerful ways, and I knew the same could be true for others. Learning to connect and express emotions appropriately from a place of autonomy has been a gift. I'd like to share the five key components that were pivotal as I committed to uncovering, discovering, and evolving as I practiced my faith, therapy, and artistic expression.

1. Awareness – We start to take notice of the range of experiences, emotions, beliefs, and behaviors, along with assessing their impacts.
2. Acknowledgment – We become comfortable saying it is so. But although we may be able to call it out, this does not mean we are ready to accept all of it.
3. Acceptance – This is the embrace phase. We move into holding all of our discoveries with loving and nonjudgmental care.
4. Appreciation – This might just be the most challenging part. It's when we search for meaning and find ways to appreciate who we are despite all of it, whatever "it" might be for us. This practice can help us move into what is known as post-traumatic growth.
5. Action – We get clear about how to integrate what has been uncovered with our core values and strengths, and use it to create our way to wellness and authentic expression.

No matter how your story goes, if you have found yourself in a similar place, I am confident that you can make peace and embrace all of who you are, what you've experienced, and take the courage to be present and face what's in front of you at any given moment—one moment at a time. Take the moment and use it for embracing fully well.

TRACY W. REESE



Tracy W. Reese is a self-taught artist who started painting eighteen years ago. Her creative explorations allowed her to discover how empowering and therapeutic the creative process can be. She felt a strong urge to share with others what she had discovered for herself. As a certified personal/professional and mental health coach, she now uses creative expression as a tool to promote wellness and cultivate authenticity in the lives of her clients. In addition to her coaching certifications, she also went back to school and now majors in psychology with a minor in studio art. That, along with eleven years of leading in a ministry devoted to supporting others through trauma and relational brokenness, has developed the heart from which she speaks, serves, coaches, and creates.

You can connect with Tracy at www.hearthuesllc.com.

² “Dissociative Disorders.” *Mayo Clinic*, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 17 Nov. 2017,

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