

AOSW 2026



Annual Conference

June 10-12, 2026

Pre-Conferences: June 9, 2026

#AOSW2026

Portland Marriott Downtown Waterfront
Portland, Oregon USA



Healing Through Compassion: The Journey of Building a Self-Compassion Program for the Cancer Experience

Kim Lowery Walker, MBA, LCSW & Carolyn Leonard, MSW
Contributing Author: Jenna Sangastiano, LPC
Inova Peterson Life with Cancer

*Before we get started, please take a few minutes to complete the
Self-Compassion Scale by scanning the QR code.*



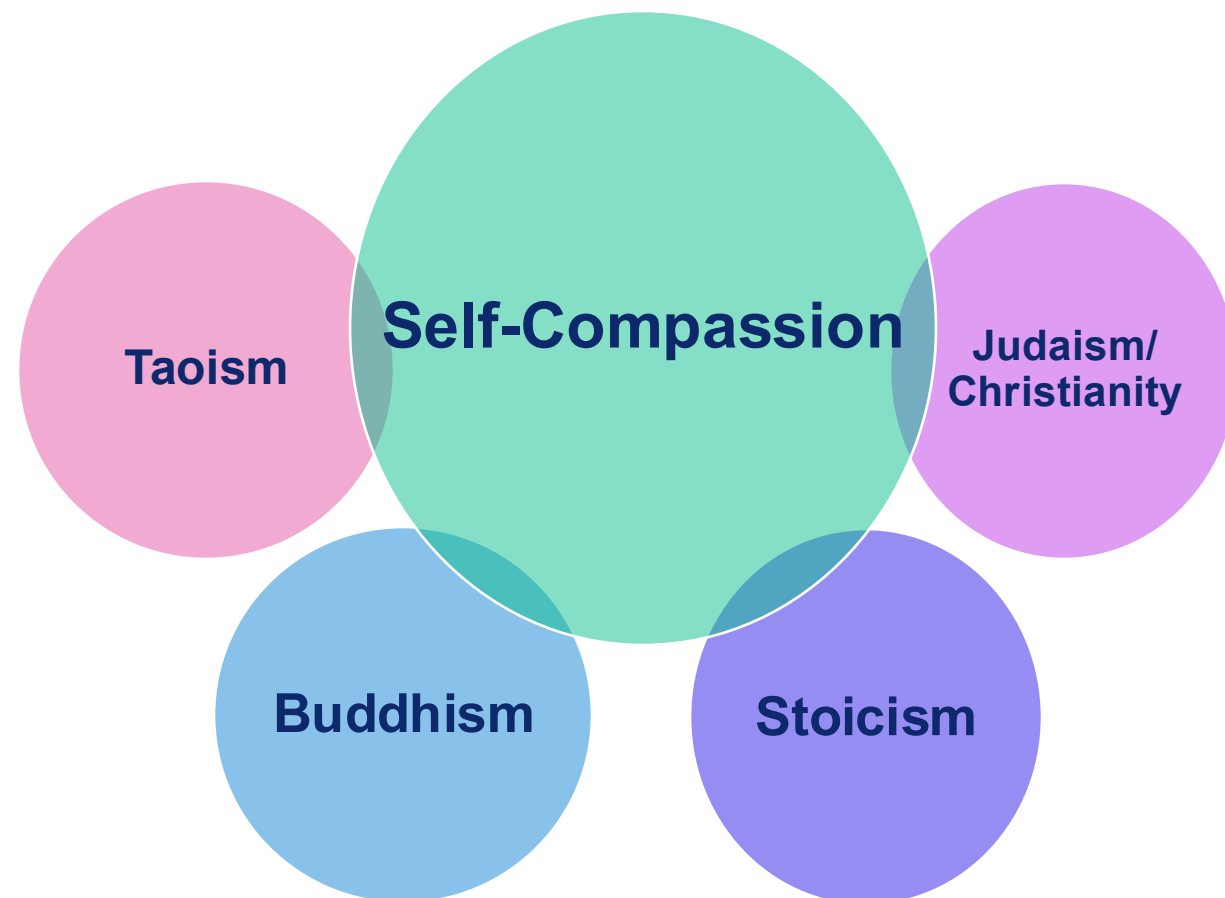
Agenda

- Why Self-Compassion?
- Program Development Process
- Our Curriculum
- Results & Lessons Learned
- Future Directions

Why self-compassion?

Why Self-Compassion?

- **Compassion** is the impulse or act to alleviate the suffering of others.
- **Self-compassion** involves turning that action inward to treat yourself in a way that alleviates suffering.



Research

- Since Neff's original work in 2003/2004 into the effects of self-compassion, empirical research into the subject has burgeoned.
- For example, a 2021 meta-analysis (Phillips & Hine, 2022) investigating relationships between self-compassion and (1) physical health and (2) health-promoting behavior, found higher scores in self-compassion reflect increases in health-positive factors and behaviors, And decreases in detrimental tendencies and behaviors.

- 
- Life Satisfaction
 - Subjective well-being
 - Social Connectedness
 - Acceptance
 - Positive thoughts about experience

- 
- Neuroticism
 - Depression
 - Catastrophizing
 - Rumination
 - Self-pity
 - Post-traumatic stress

Self-Compassion in Oncology

- Research shows that people with cancer are at an increased risk for experiencing mental distress and self-criticism.
- However, studies increasingly indicate that higher self-compassion among people with cancer is significantly associated with lower depression anxiety and distress, lower body-image distress, higher treatment adherence, and higher resilience.
- Intervention studies further demonstrate the relevance of self-compassion: education and training in self-compassion skills can lower anxiety, depression, and self-criticism in people with cancer.
- Such stressors occurs throughout the cancer experience timeline (diagnosis, treatment, survivorship) and, in related ways, to people caring for people with cancer.

Clinical examples

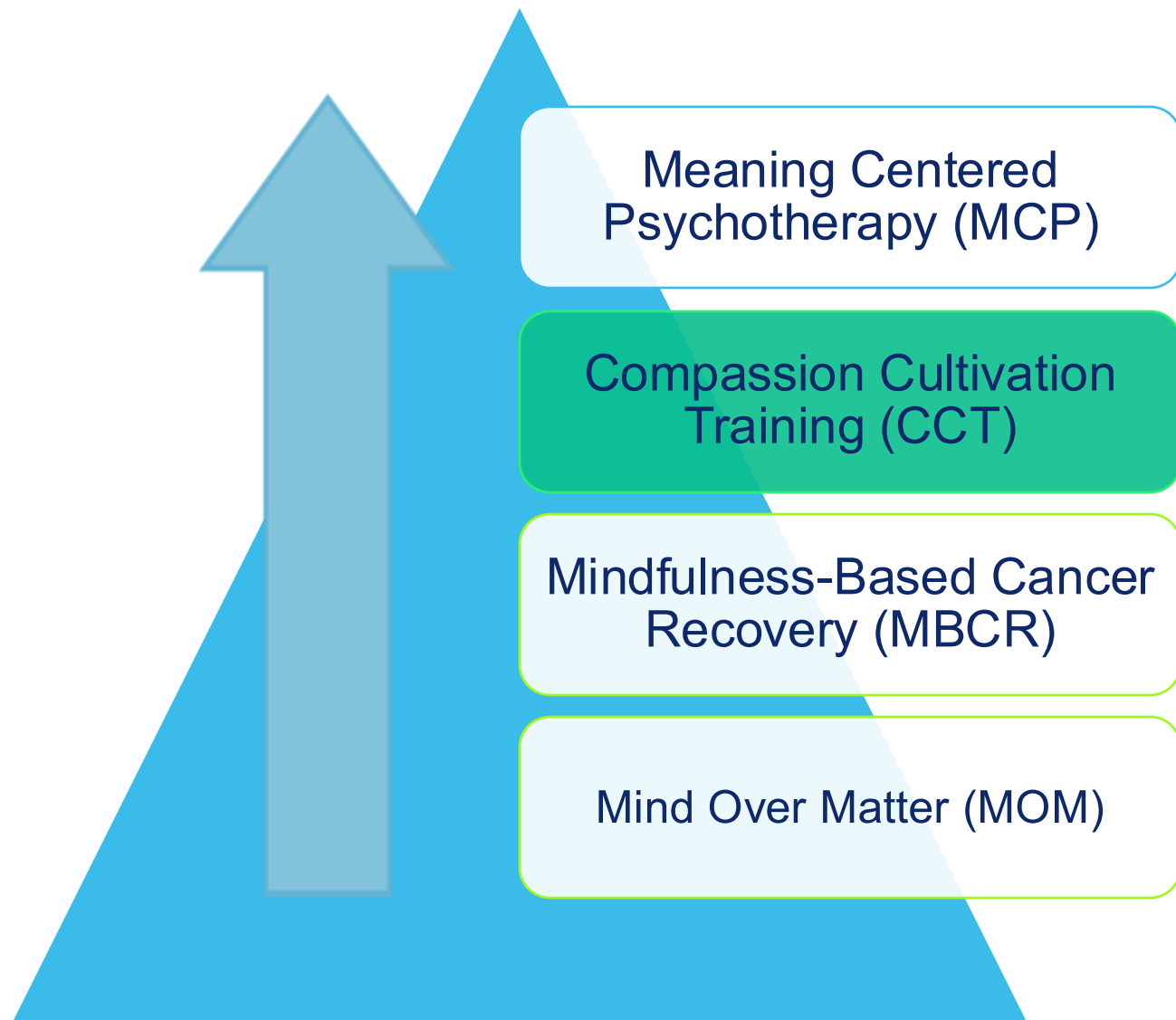
Inova Life with Cancer's model includes therapists, nurse navigators, fitness practitioners, and dieticians working with cancer patients, caregivers, and families both 1:1 and in medical spaces from diagnosis to treatment and survivorship or end-of-life.

- Fitness program manager—Regularly hears patients criticizing their bodies during classes or consultations.
- Therapists—Patients discuss emotional aspects of cancer in terms of weakness: "I should be able to manage this," "I should be back to normal by now," "I can't just be a useless bum because I'm tired."
- Caregivers often report feeling guilty because they want time for themselves, because they feel frustrated that their loved one can't do what they used to—"But I'm not the one with cancer!"

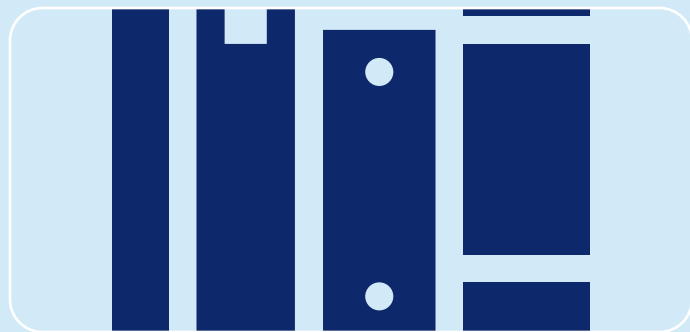


Program Development Process

Integrative Psycho-Oncology Program (IPOP)



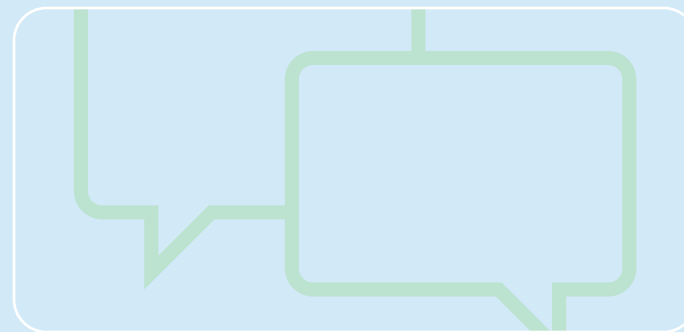
Drivers of Change



Curriculum
Constraints



Staffing
Issues



Participant
Feedback

What are our options?



Mindful Self-Compassion

- ⊕ Well-established curriculum
- ⊕ Strongest evidence base

- ⊖ Large investment of time and money
- ⊖ Difficult to scale internally
- ⊖ Inability to adapt materials to cancer population

vs.

New Program Development

- ⊕ Flexibility to respond to patient needs
- ⊕ Control over materials
- ⊕ Ability to train new staff at low cost

- ⊖ Time upfront to develop new program
- ⊖ Weaker evidence base

Step 1: Introduction to Self-Compassion Workshop

What is self-compassion?

What is the science behind self-compassion?

How can self-compassion help navigate cancer?

How can I practice self-compassion?

Initial Results



Offered 4 times between Fall 2023 and Spring 2025



34 participants



Sustained good feedback and continued interest

**CCT canceled due to low registrations
We need a new curriculum ASAP!**

Foundations of Self-Compassion Curriculum

Evidence-Based

- Builds on Kristin Neff's Self-Compassion Work

Cancer-Specific

- Research
- Clinical experience

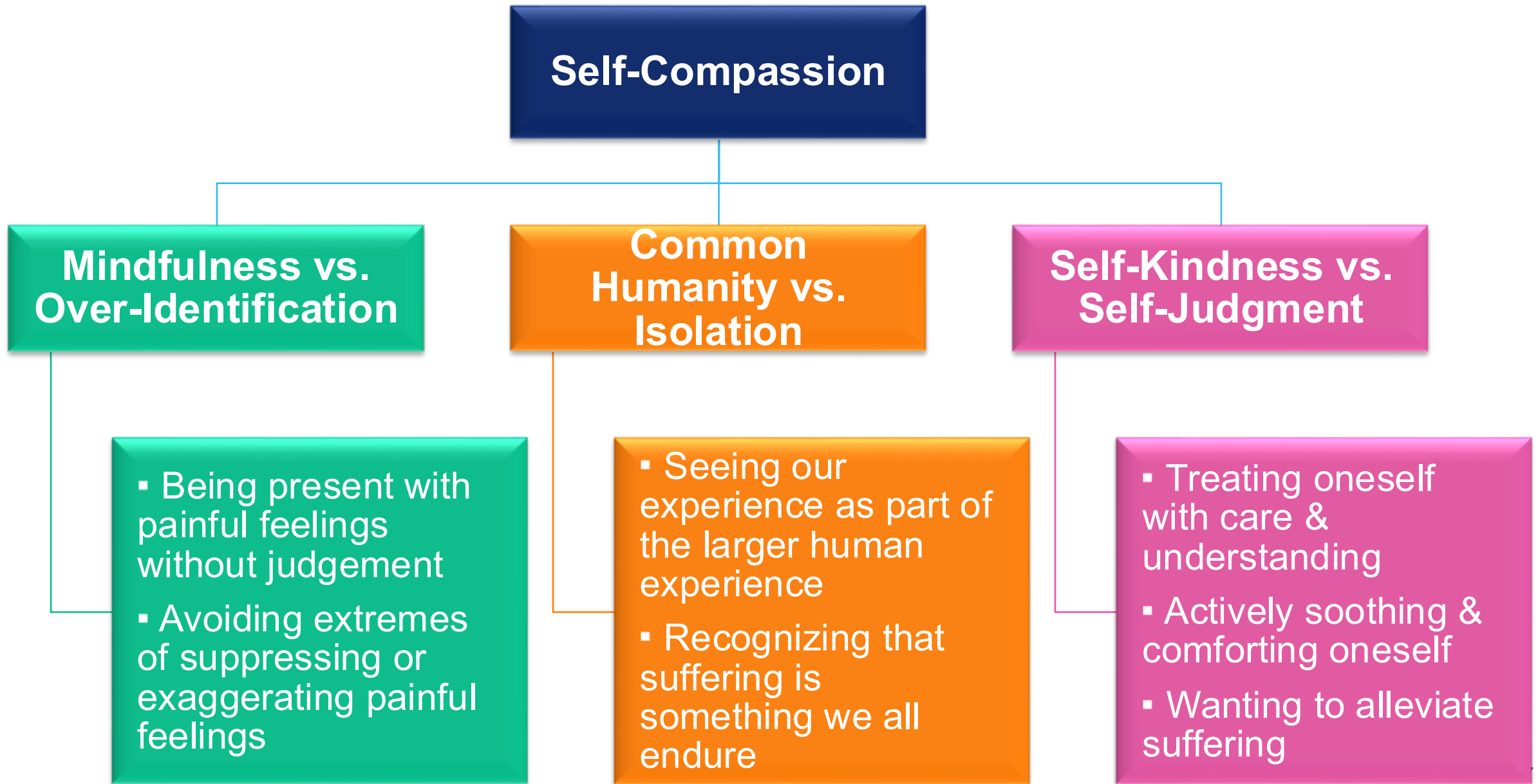
Interactive

- Meditations
- Group discussions
- Writing exercises

Scalable

- Facilitator Manual
- Participant Workbook

Kristin Neff's Model of Self-Compassion



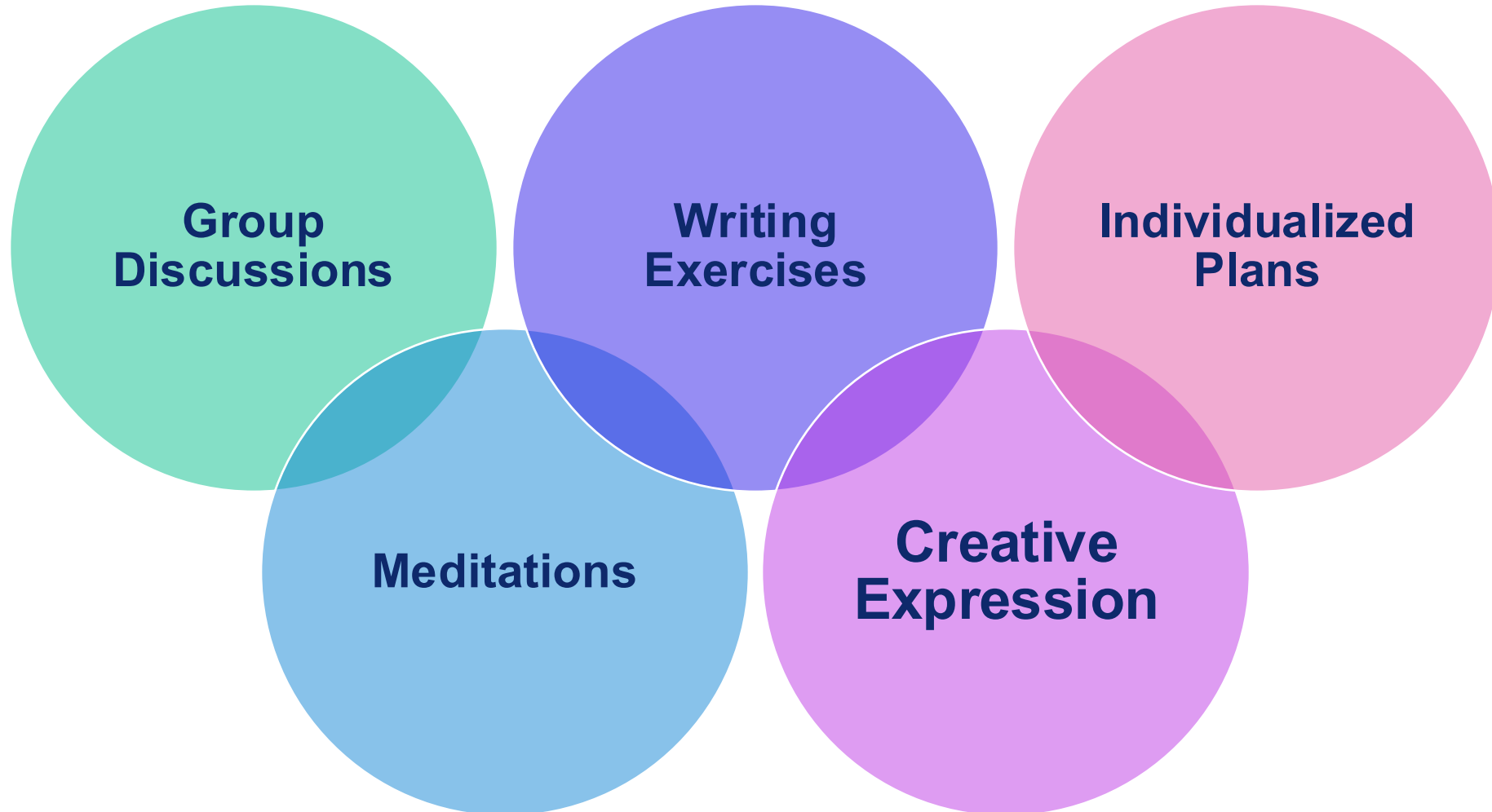
What did your self-compassion scores look like?

Did anything surprise you?



- 1 • Introduction to Self-Compassion
- 2 • Mindfulness
- 3 • Mindfulness
- 4 • Common Humanity
- 5 • Self-Kindness
- 6 • Self-Kindness
- * • Optional: Half-Day Retreat

Interactive



Session 1: Self- Compassion Break

What Self-Compassion is NOT



Myth:
Self-compassion
is self-pity.



Reality:
Self-compassion acknowledges
difficulty while maintaining perspective
and motivation for positive action.



Myth:
Self-compassion
is self-indulgence.



Reality:
When you are kind to yourself, you have
more emotional resources to support
others and engage in your treatment.

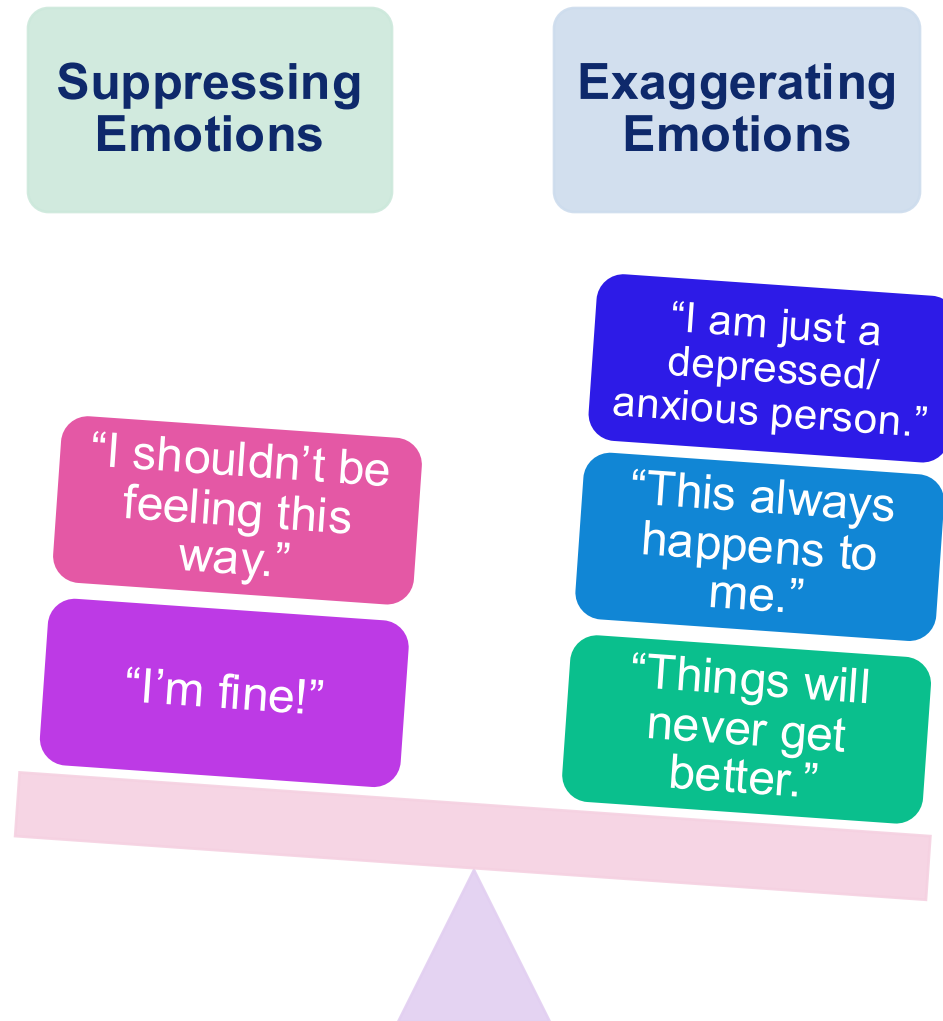


Myth:
Self-criticism is a
good motivator.

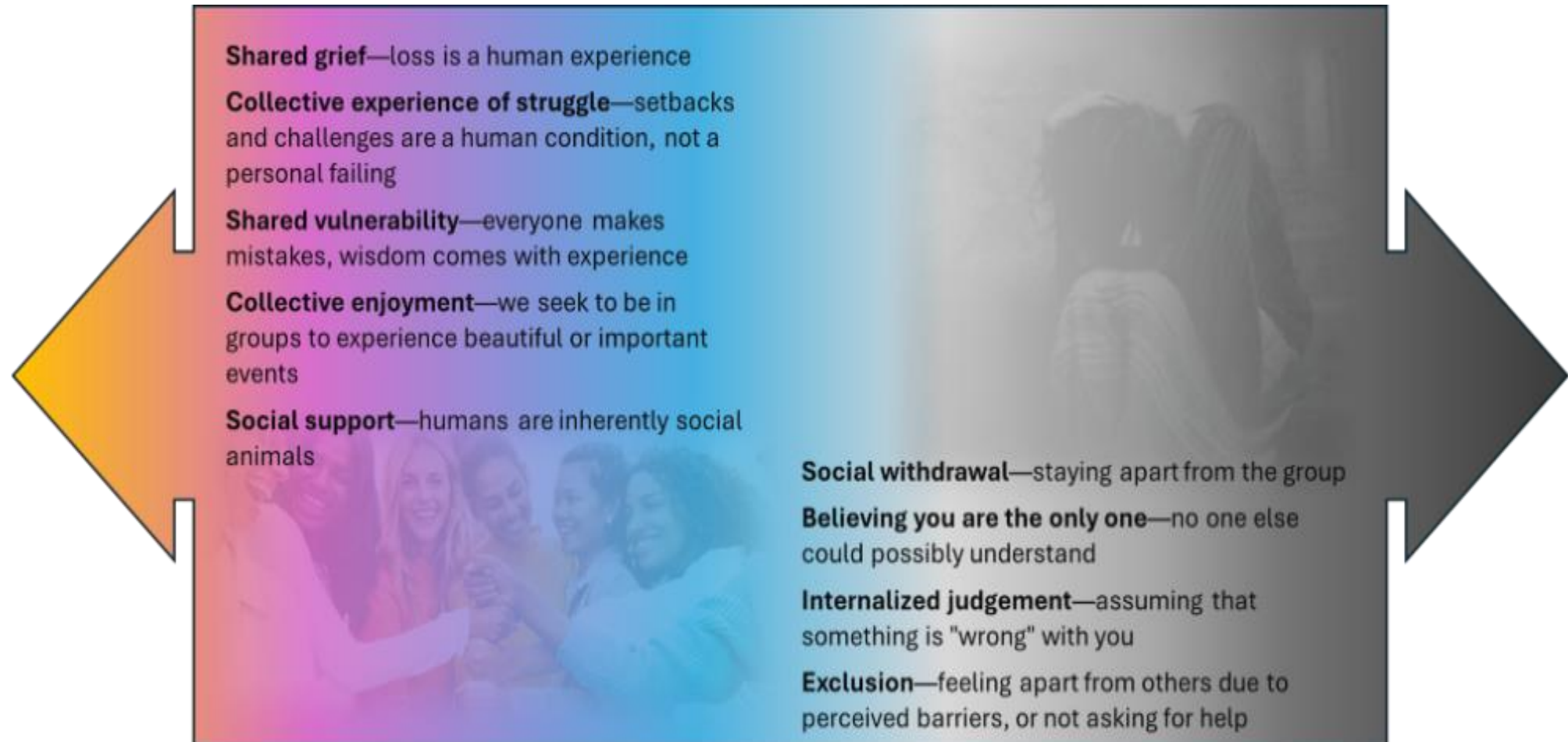


Reality:
True strength includes gentleness with
yourself. Compassion provides
sustainable resilience.

Over-identification



Common Humanity vs. Isolation



Self Criticism vs. Self-Kindness: The Double Arrow

Cancer-Specific

Discussions

Example: Cancer's role in highlighting common humanity or creating isolation

Adaptation of exercises

Example: Ice cube exercise to sit with mild discomfort; options for neuropathy

Exploring shared experiences

Body image, being a burden vs. accepting help/kindness from others

Participant workbook

Suggestions for routines during different treatment phases

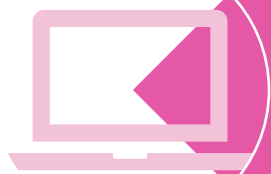
Scalable



Facilitator Manual



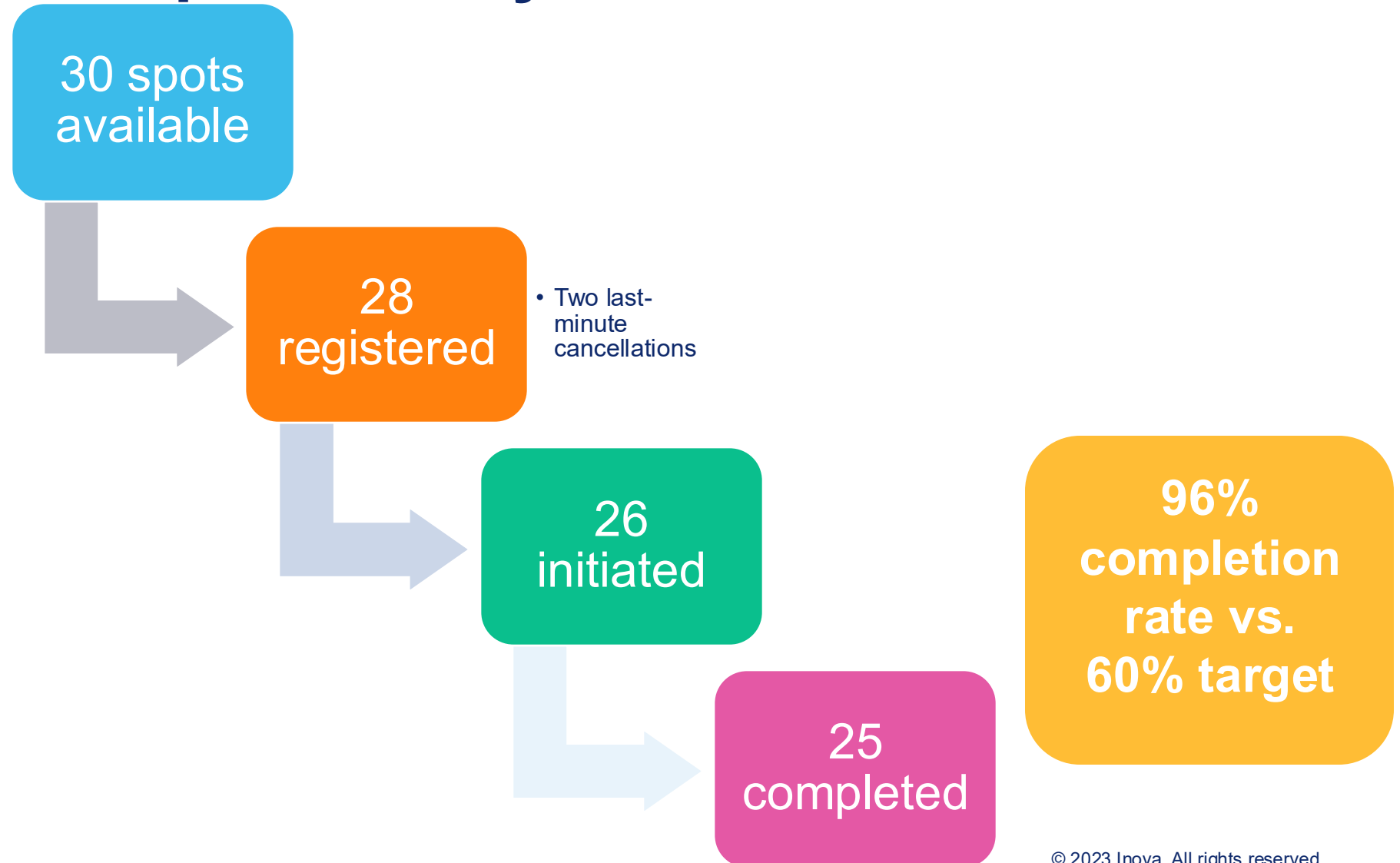
Participant Workbook



Participant Website

Results & Lessons Learned

People showed up! And stayed!



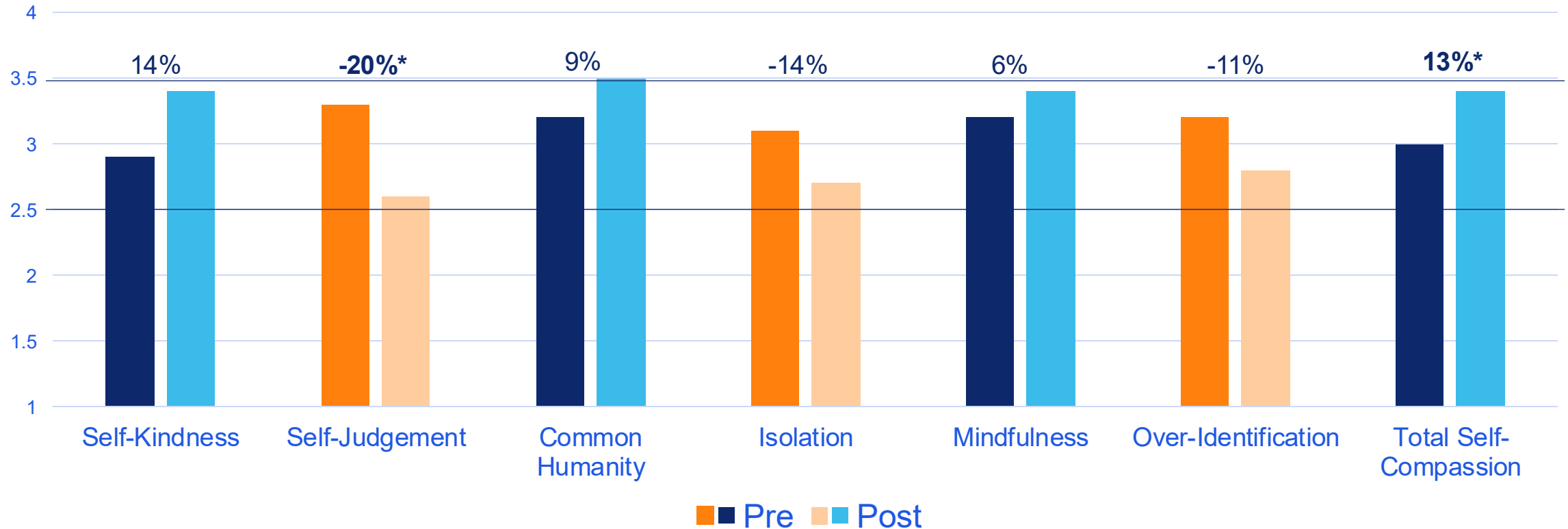
And liked it!



Overall Rating	4.9
Facilitation	4.9
Content	4.85
Materials	4.85
Sense of Community	5.0
Likelihood to recommend	4.9

The content, facilitators, and group of people participating were exactly what and who I needed. I am so, so, so grateful. This was transformative.

Changes in Self-Compassion Scores

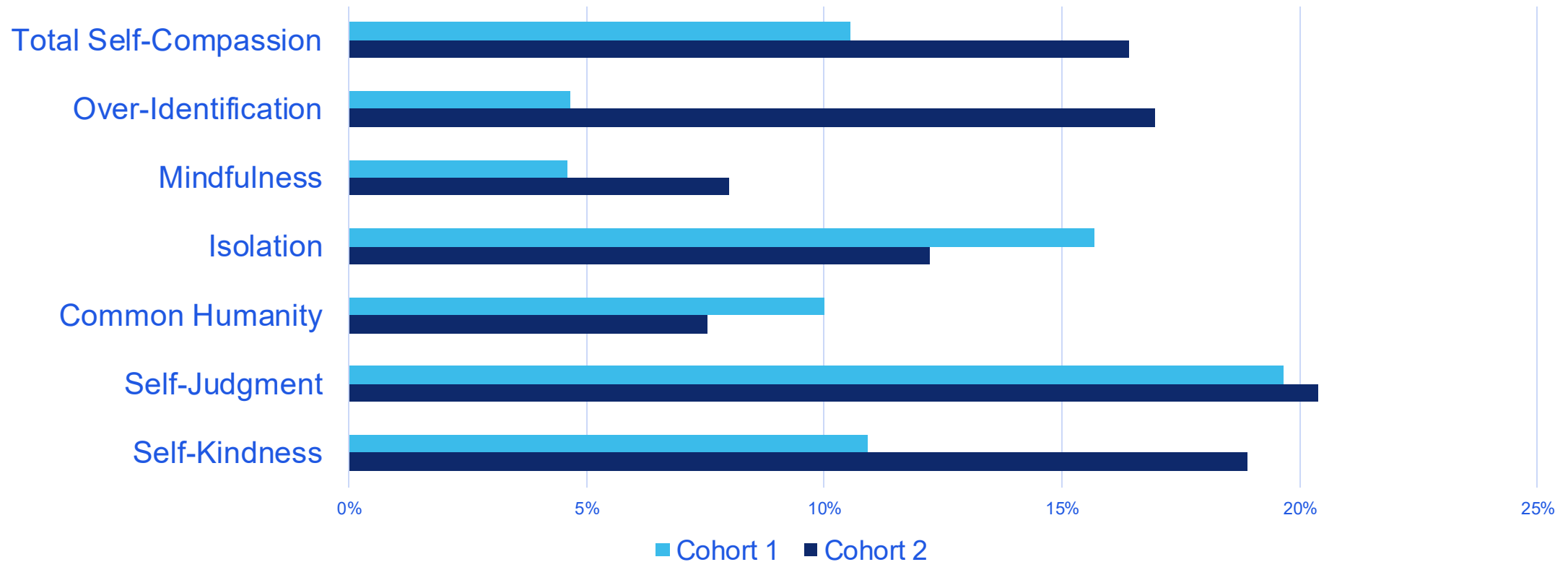


* Caveats

- Results collected anonymously, so not a 1:1 match for pre-post data
- 25 pre-tests and 19 post-tests
- All participants completed Mind Over Matter and/or Mindfulness-Based Cancer Recovery

The second cohort started with lower scores and had bigger improvements.

Percentage Improvement by Cohort



Practicing tools of self-compassion, overall—and knowing this is a complex set of things, for me, this starts with observing how I'm feeling with non-judgment. I had this skill in theory—but this program really extended this and made it meaningful for me.

I'm better able to recognize harsh and harmful self-assessment, so I can respond more kindly and constructively. I hope the benefit can make me kinder to others.

Whenever I want to get into some tough self-judgement, put on the brakes and do some self-kindness instead!

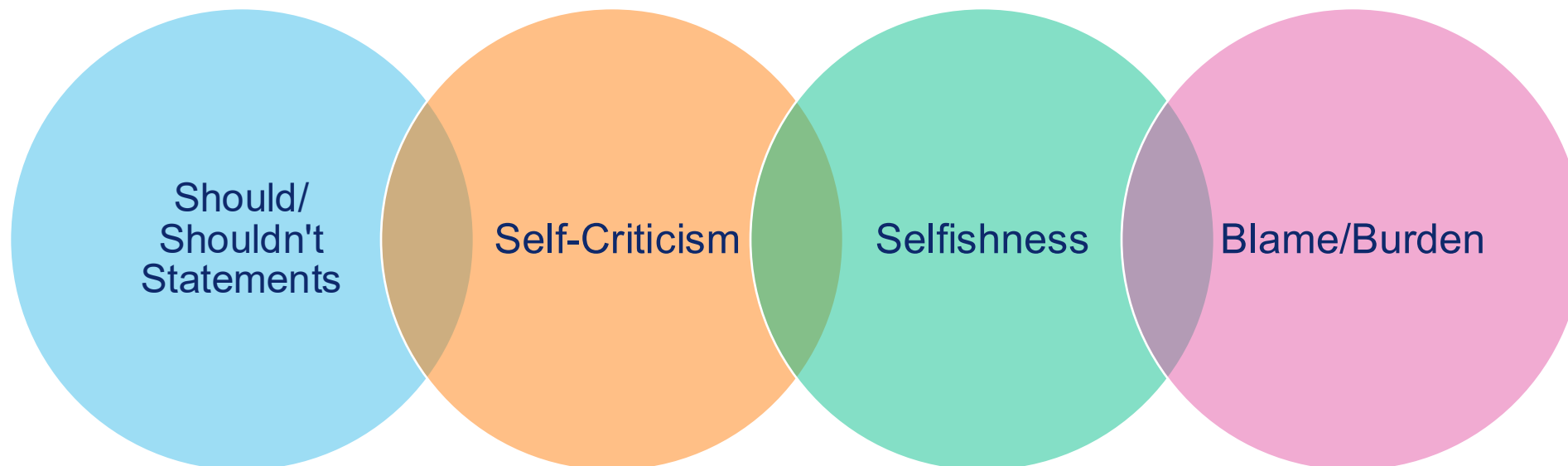
Future Directions

Where Do We Go From Here?



How can I use Self-Compassion in my practice?

When you hear patients say:



**Think about how you can incorporate
Self-Compassion!**

Questions?