

# **Assessing Competence in the context of Mindful Self Compassion (MSC)**

## **MSC-TAC:**

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## **7 Domains of MSC Teaching Competence\***

- Domain 1 - Understanding the Curriculum
- Domain 2 - Embodying Self-Compassion
- Domain 3 - Relating Compassionately to Others
- Domain 4 - Teaching Topics
- Domain 5 - Guiding Practices and Class Exercises
- Domain 6 - Facilitating Group Process
- Domain 7 - Engaging in Inquiry

\*Adapted from The Bangor, Exeter & Oxford Mindfulness-Based Interventions Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI:TAC)

The content of the MSC-TAC is essentially the same as the MBI:TAC because MSC is a mindfulness-based training program, although the focus of MSC is on cultivating compassion. The titles and order of the domains of competence were slightly changed. Additionally, inquiry and didactic teaching were made into separate domains of competence in MSC-TAC, and the key features in all the domains were modified, to correspond to how self-compassion is taught in MSC.

## Domain 1: Understanding the Curriculum

*Five key features are included in this domain:*

- (i) **Organization** - level of organization of the teacher, room and materials
- (ii) **Intention** – teacher shows understanding of the purpose(s) of each session and how the content relates to the rest of the course
- (iii) **Content** – teacher shows complete familiarity with the content in each session
- (iv) **Flexibility** - teacher is responsive to the needs of the group while adhering to the curriculum
- (v) **Pacing** – the session feels unhurried, spacious, and flows from one topic to the next

**Overview:** The teacher adequately addresses and covers at least 85% of the non-optional curriculum content of each session. The teacher is well organized with relevant course materials and teaching aids readily available and the room is appropriately prepared for the group. Teachers should be thoroughly familiar with the content of a session before beginning a class, especially the intention of each topic, practice, and class exercise. Each session could take much longer than the allotted time (2 ¾ hours), so teachers must find a skillful balance between the needs of each individual, the group, and the requirements of teaching the course. However, when in doubt, a sense of connection in the classroom is more important than content. Overall, the session should be paced with a sense of spaciousness, steadiness, and lack of time pressure. Digressions are steered back into the session curriculum with tact and ease.

## **Domain 2: Embodying Mindfulness and Self-Compassion**

*Five key features are included in this domain:*

- (i) **Warmth** – teacher teaches mindfulness and self-compassion by embodying loving, connected presence.*
- (ii) **Present-focus** – teacher stays connected with their own experience, moment-by-moment, and is tuned-in to the experience of their participants*
- (iii) **Personal practice** – teacher maintains a personal practice of mindfulness and self-compassion, especially by practicing at home what will be taught in the next session*
- (iv) **Modeling** – teachers are primarily students of mindfulness and self-compassion, as demonstrated by how they respond to their own teaching errors and their use of personal vignettes*
- (v) **Emotional self-regulation** – ability to remain calm and compassionate when a participant is overwhelmed or when challenged by a participant*

**Overview:** The first foundation for teaching MSC is embodying the practice. This means that teachers stay connected with how they feel, moment-to-moment, as well as with the participants, and do so with an attitude of warmth and genuine caring for the wellbeing of each individual. To do this, teachers need to have a daily practice of mindfulness and self-compassion. A key skill of MSC teachers is to maintain equanimity and warmth when they are challenged by participants or fall short of their own expectations.

### **Domain 3: Relating Compassionately to Others**

*Five key features are included in this domain:*

- (i) **Behavior** – teacher behaves compassionately toward each participant and their co-teacher.*
- (ii) **Safety** – teacher strives to protect the emotional safety of each participant by respecting their vulnerabilities, boundaries and the need for privacy*
- (iii) **Mutuality** – teacher engages in collaborative working relationships with each participant based on genuine interest and care by the teacher*
- (iv) **Diversity, equity and inclusion** – teacher embodies cultural humility, along with an effort to grow in awareness of the impact of cultural narratives on the identity/identities of each participants*
- (v) **Ethical standards** – teacher behaves ethically, especially regarding the teacher-student power imbalance (see MSC Ethical Guidelines)*

**Overview:** The second foundation for teaching self-compassion is to *be* compassionate. The qualities that the teacher brings to their relationships with participants and their co-teachers mirror the qualities participants are learning to bring to themselves during the program. To feel compassion, participants need to feel safe, so safety should be in the front of a teacher’s mind while teaching. In addition to creating “safe space” for our groups, we are creating a “brave space” where participants can be themselves, just as they are, and have their own voices. This requires cultural humility - a willingness to learn about the cultural experience of each participant. Compassionate relating also means that everyone is equal regardless who is the teacher and who is the student. [Ethical guidelines](#) have been created to support the teacher’s ability to be compassionate in the teaching role and those guidelines need to be followed to be a MSC teacher.

## Domain 4: Teaching Topics

*Five key features are included in this domain:*

- (i) **Succinct** – *topic is taught clearly and concisely, with evident careful preparation*
- (ii) **Passionate** – *teacher relates topics to their own life and interests, and teaches them with emotional engagement.*
- (iii) **Interactive** – *talks are lively and engaged, by asking questions and avoiding intellectual debates.*
- (iv) **Modalities** – *teacher varies the teaching methods, for example, by using video, poetry, movement, music, or research.*
- (v) **Poetry** – *teacher only reads poems they understand and appreciate, transmitting the essence by reading in an embodied manner*

**Overview:** There are 34 topics in the MSC program. These topics are designed primarily to open the door to practices and experiential learning. Topics can be fun and engaging, and are another way for teachers to reveal their own humanity and explore exciting, new ideas in an interactive manner.

Therefore, they should be carefully prepared to be succinct and engaging, keeping intellectual discussion to a minimum. Teachers should construct their talks around the points they are most passionate about, connect with the audience with questions and personal vignettes, vary the teaching method, and use poems to transmit the felt sense of the topic, as desired.

## Domain 5: Guiding Practices and Class Exercises

**Five key features** are included in this domain:

- (i) **Intention** – the teacher guides practices and exercises in a way that clearly communicates the intentions and key points to participants
- (ii) **Style** – the teacher guides in their own voice, from within (embodied), with an invitational style
- (iii) **Tone** – kind, compassionate, and natural
- (iv) **Safety** – teacher monitors the level of difficulty for participants, regulates tone and tempo, and provides safety caveats
- (v) **Time management** – practices and exercises are delivered spaciously, yet efficiently, within the allotted time.

**Overview:** The MSC program contains 9 formal practices (meditations), 20 informal practices (daily life), and 14 class exercises. All these practices and exercises should be led “from within;” in an embodied manner that communicates authenticity and shared experience.

When leading *class exercises*, the actual language (text) of the exercise should be carefully followed since class exercises are likely to be emotionally activating and the exercises have been carefully honed to be safe and effective for most people. The language used during *practices* (formal and informal) is less critical than the felt-sense, but the intention of the meditation should be clearly communicated in the practice.

Safety is paramount when leading practices and exercises. Teachers can offer safety caveats (i.e., opening and closing), modulate their tone or tempo, or skip a practice altogether depending on the needs of the group. Practices and exercises should be guided in a natural voice that is also warm and compassionate. Experienced teachers learn how to deliver practices and exercises in an efficient manner – not too long and not too short.

## Domain 6: Facilitating Group Process

*Five key features are included in this domain:*

- (i) **Selection of participants and co-teacher** – teacher carefully selects each participant regarding their capacity to learn and to connect with other group members, and their co-teacher based on ease and support.*
- (ii) **Culture of kindness** – teachers create a learning space in both one-to-one and whole group interactions that promotes emotional safety, embraces diversity, embodies an attitude of non-fixing, and reveals common humanity.*
- (iii) **Trauma sensitivity** – teacher recognizes and works with backdraft in the group context, especially trauma, safely and effectively*
- (iv) **Leadership** - teacher demonstrates authority and inner strength, especially by managing disruptive participants and regulating the mood of the group*
- (v) **Participant engagement** – teacher skillfully encourages group participation, class attendance, and home practice.*

**Overview:** The importance of the group cannot be overestimated. Participants learn self-compassion more easily when they feel the compassion of other group members, and they are likely to drop out of the course if they feel they do not belong in the group. Therefore, attention to group process is a core skill for MSC teachers, starting with selection of participants. Extra effort given to selection will insure a more successful group experience. The goal is to create a “culture of kindness” that participants can “slip themselves into” and then learn to bring kindness and compassion to themselves. Challenges will inevitably arise, such as trauma/backdraft or disruptive participants (which can also be a form of backdraft). Teachers need to feel empowered as the group leader to protect the whole group when difficulties arise. Teachers should also promote participation in the group by using encouragement and support rather than a sense of obligation. Finally, the co-teaching relationship is a key component of group process insofar as co-teachers model compassionate attitudes and behavior with each other, as well as with participants and themselves.

## Domain 7: Engaging in inquiry

*Five key features are included in this domain:*

- (i) **Radical acceptance** – teacher helps the inquiree to meet their experience with mindfulness and compassion, i.e., making space for them to feel whatever they feel and to be just as they are
- (ii) **Resonance** – teacher tunes-in to the subjective experience of the inquiree and reflects back salient moments (“pings”) that appear to relate to the purpose of the practice.
- (iii) **Resource-building** – teacher cultivates the inquiree’s inner resources by validating what is already there or by helping to evoke mindfulness and self-compassion during inquiry itself.
- (iv) **Collaboration** – teacher assumes the inquiree is the best “expert” about their own experience and empowers them to develop their own insights and resources
- (v) **Managing time and content** – teacher keeps the focus of inquiry on the participant’s direct experience while illuminating the purpose and skills taught through the practice

**Overview:** Inquiry is a self-to-other dialogue that mirrors the mindful and self-compassionate self-to-self relationship that we are cultivating in MSC. *Radical acceptance* is the overall attitude of inquiry, *resonance* is the primary mode of engagement, and *resource-building* is the desired outcome of inquiry. Inquiry is a collaborative process with the purpose of building the resources of mindfulness and self-compassion, not to “fix” anyone or to explicitly heal old wounds. Teachers need to manage the inquiry process so that each inquiry stays on the participant’s direct experience of the practice or exercise, related to the intention of that, and relevant to the whole group. The goal of inquiry is to demonstrate in real-time how to hold pain mindfully and self-compassionately. Inquiry becomes more efficient as teachers learn what kinds of experiences are elicited by each practice and they can link those experiences to the intention and skills learned in each practice.



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The Center for MSC is deeply grateful to Rebecca Crane and her colleagues for their groundbreaking research on teaching mindfulness-based programs.

The MSC-TAC was primarily designed to support MSC teachers and their mentors during teacher training, and MSC-TAC will hopefully evolve over the years as feedback is received from teachers and research is conducted.

Current versions of the full original MBI:TAC tool are freely available here: [mbitac.bangor.ac.uk/](http://mbitac.bangor.ac.uk/)