

NWRPA Newsletter April 2025

An Exploration of Mirrors in Compassion Focused Work

Howard Winfield

14 April 2025

Summary by Frank Kelley

Howard Winfield is a counselling psychologist who became interested in this question based on his own study of Buddhism, his practise in meditation and his interest in compassion focused approaches to therapy, particularly the concept of *self-love*.

The history of mirrors goes back to neolithic times when people looked at their refections in polished stones. Later the Egyptians used obsidian, glass and metal mirrors. The Romans were expert glassmakers. Today intricate mirrors orbit the Earth.

Mirrors have long been considered to have particular significance and even spiritual implications in the realm of psychology and psychotherapy. Consider for example the concept of the *mirror self* in which a person seeks to act in a way consistent with their perception of how other people see them. Or Lacan's *mirror self* as a stage in the formation of the *I-self*. Freud's work on Narcissism relates to the Roman Myth of the hunter Narcissus who was renowned for his beauty. He rejected the advances of women and men and instead falls in love with his reflection in a pool.

Indeed, the very beginnings of an autobiographical sense of self can be detected in infants aged between 18 and 24 months by use of the mirror (Amsterdam, 1972). Although not formally trained as a psychologist and psychotherapist, author Louise Hay's self-help book *Mirror Work: 21 Days to Heal Your Life* became an international bestseller when it was published in 2016, leading to a surge of interest from professionals about the potential role of mirrors in client work.

Many therapists came to believe that using mirrors with clients could be valuable, yet with scant, if any, evidence of efficacy other than an investigation into heart rate variability when mirrors were utilised in compassionate self talk (Petrocchi et al., 2016).

Intuitively perhaps, mirrors seem to enable us to meet perhaps or even confront ourselves, but is this necessarily a good thing? Howard pointed out that these reports on the usefulness of mirrors in therapy were all without peer review or published data. They also focussed on the usefulness of mirror work but not any possible harmful effects.

Recognising an absence of evidence in the literature, Howard set out to investigate this area, ultimately conducting his own empirical study to identify the impact of using mirrors in research where participants were randomly assigned to one of two versions of a seven session self compassion focused intervention. One group completed the work while sitting in front of a mirror and the other group simply closed their eyes. Each participant then wrote a reflective journal entry following each exercise.

Howard shared with us his findings, which are both interesting and indeed surprising. Using standard testing he found little difference in the two groups. There was certainly little difference in the number of compassionate words between the mirror and non mirror groups. Words related to control and autonomy followed this pattern.

A clear theme is that the mirror could be comforting, distracting and yet profound. Talking out loud was difficult and beneficial. It brought out the participants inner critic but also allowed responses to that critic. Participants using their own name found this an unexpected source of reflection.

NB all the subjects were experienced meditators who soothed the thoughts that came up.

From his research and engagement with this therapy Howard believes that with self compassion powerful things came up in a way that was positive in the long term.

Thank you to Howard Winfield for his skill and willingness to engage us in a reflective exploration of a form of therapy which would be unfamiliar to most of our members.

Amsterdam, B. (1972). *Mirror self-image reactions before age two*. The journal of the international society for developmental psychobiology, 5(4), 297-305.

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Petrocchi, N., Ottaviani, C., & Couyoumdjian, A. (2017). *Compassion at the mirror: Exposure to a mirror increases the efficacy of a self-compassion manipulation in enhancing soothing positive affect and heart rate variability*. The Journal of positive psychology, 12(6), 525-536.