

*A new country, a global pandemic, and a history of depression—  
Charukesi Ramadurai had every reason to panic. Instead, she learned to treat herself with kindness.*

**MY**  
**LOCKDOWN**  
**GIFT**  
**TO**  
**MYSELF**

I SPENT MOST OF MY LAST VIDEO CALL WITH MY THERAPIST insisting that I was in denial about the Covid-19 crisis. The gist of my conversation was this: Why was I feeling so calm and collected, when everyone around me seemed to be having minor meltdowns, mounting anxiety, and capricious mood swings? When will I be back to normal, I asked her.

You see, for nearly 20 years now, normal for me had been about living as a high-functioning depressive, waiting for that next debilitating spell of darkness and despondency to take over. And here I was—in Malaysia, a country I had moved to recently, in the early stages of a global pandemic, and just four weeks before it went into complete lockdown. Understandably, I was panicking... but about not panicking enough.

My therapist heard me out and then gently suggested that perhaps I needed to rethink my understanding of normal. Think about why you are not sliding back into depression. Think about what has changed, she said.

My instinctive response was that nothing had changed: Wasn't I still questioning myself, my motives, my behaviour? It took time for me to recognise the one major difference in my life: I had learned to be kind to myself. All my adult life, I had looked at the idea of self-love with wonder and even trepidation—what made those “*mein apni* favourite *hoon*” types tick? But I had rarely been able to show any compassion and love towards myself.

I think the change started when I suddenly noticed a series of purple patches on my forearms. In all these years, I had never been one for self-harm; where did these come from then? As it turned out, these were mementos of my time in the kitchen, furiously wiping the stove while stirring the saucepan with the bubbling sambhar or around the sizzling *tava* with the *aloo paratha*. And so those angry burn marks; I sported them like they were medals for my efforts to keep the kitchen shining and spotless.

If this is not self-harm, then what is.

That's the thing nobody tells you about depression—that along with the low moods and the sobbing fits, there is a crippling lack of self-esteem. It was a constant, crushing weight on my soul, refusing to let me walk even when I knew I could fly. To shut out that harsh inner voice—whose is it, my therapist had nudged me again and again—telling me that I was never good enough, I turned into a perfectionist. I was always on self-flagellation mode to ensure that I did more and did better in every single thing. I judged myself by strict standards that I had no chance of ever meeting; I forgave others for what I considered lapses, but never myself.

I had tried many things, from writing sympathetic letters to myself to complimenting my image in the mirror every morning. I had read about Buddhist philosophy that explained self-compassion in simple words. I had even memorised this line from *You Can Heal Your Life* by Louise L Hay, a book someone had recommended as being transformative: “You've been criticising yourself for years and it hasn't worked. Try approving of yourself and see what happens.” But it had been tough, near impossible, all this while. It finally took this rough talisman of purple welts to shake me up: Why am I doing this to myself?

It is ok, I heard a new voice say—this time, my own—weak and low, unsteady and unsure. Ok for my stovetop to have dried sambhar splotches, and equally ok for me to do something I regretted later. It is ok if the floor is not mopped, the desk not dusted, the T-shirt not ironed, the meal not cooked fresh. It is ok for me to be imperfect. Breathe. Let go. And I did, slowly, stumbling at every step, but moving ahead. I learned there was a difference between self-compassion and self-pity. I learned to give up control. I learned to spend time without guilt on activities that made me happy—colouring, singing, yoga, pranayama. I finally learned to wear my own mask before assisting others.

Like most women I know, the lockdown meant that I was juggling home chores with my work as a freelance journalist, endlessly cooking and cleaning, writing and editing, bearing witness to the many acts of both kindness and cruelty being played out on social media. Given my mental health history, I was ripe for a breakdown, or at the very least, a series of mini, everyday breakdowns.

But even as I write this, the virus is raging on outside, holding the entire world prisoner. And locked up inside my home in this new city, I have found my freedom. Just by learning to be a little kinder to myself. ■

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