Cultivating Our Capacity for Compassion

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Spiritual Care Programme
Disclosure

• No financial relationships to disclose
Objectives

• Understand the difference between empathy and compassion.
• Learn a tool to build capacity for compassion and increase resilience.
• Define three habits that interfere with being fully present, with compassion.
Three Crucial Points

• Practicing compassion helps us as much as it helps others
• Compassion begins with self-compassion
• Compassion is naturally within us and can be increased through practice
What is Compassion?

• Definition:
  • The feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and a subsequent desire to help
  • More than an emotion – a way of being, an approach to reality and attitude to life
• A natural impulse in all of us
• A motivation for a career in healthcare and end-of-life care
• A skill/habit that we can increase
• What *barriers* to compassion are present in our current medical system and culture?
What is Not Compassion?

• Pity
  – When your fear touches someone’s suffering, that is pity. When your love touches someone’s suffering, that is compassion. – Stephen Levine

• Empathy
  – Empathy is the faculty to resonate with the feelings of others, the basis of compassion
  – Empathy alone can lead to burnout
Empathy

Empathetic Distress

Negativity; Withdrawal

Compassion

Feeling of Concern

Positivity; Resolve to Help

Olga Klimecki, Tania Singer research, Max Planck Institute
Witnessing suffering is itself a true experience of suffering

Singer, Seymour, O’Doherty, et al., 2004
Not a New Topic

• Cure sometimes, treat often, comfort always.
  • Hippocrates ≈ 400 B.C.

• “One of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”
  • Francis Peabody, JAMA 1927
Neuroscience of Empathy

• Mirror neurons cause us to feel another’s experience: their sentiments, movements, sensations, emotions
• Allows us to grasp their mind through feeling what they feel, not by thinking
• Empathy occurs as a fast response of emotional contagion (without cognitive input) or slower response with option for choosing reaction
• When we perceive an emotion in someone else, the same pathway is activated in us
Science of Compassion

- Practicing compassion increases activation in areas of brain associated with positive emotions and decreases activity in areas associated with anger on fMRI testing
- Activation of parasympathetic NS and release of oxytocin result in calming, contentment, soothing
- Compassion reduces cortisol and increases vagal tone
- Mortality risk is reduced 50-91%, 3x more than the effect of physical exercise
Cognitive Aspects of Compassion

• Compassion = empathy + reason
• We can separate our self from others, assess situation accurately and allocate attentional resources.
• “A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination.” – Nelson Mandela
Practicing Compassion

• Be fully present
• Begin with self-compassion
• Have the intention to be of service, help others
• Consider the perspectives of others
• Learn compassion practices
• Practice the practices so that they become a habit
Self-Compassion

- Taking a moment to calm and comfort yourself when you feel bad, just as you would comfort a friend
- Recognizing that we are all flawed human beings
- It is not: sugarcoating, egoistic self-esteem, complacent, self-indulgent, exhausting, selfish, self-pity, complacent or unnatural
Self-Compassion

• We instinctively fight negative experiences
• We tend to find fault in ourselves when things go wrong
• We can stand up to the harm we inflict on ourselves by holding ourselves to unrealistic expectations
Elements of Self-Compassion

• Kindness – being kind to ourself
• A sense of common humanity – all are flawed, personal failures are simply a part of life
• Mindfulness – nonjudgmental noticing of present moment experiences, bodily responses
• Spaciousness – not feeling trapped in our suffering
• Humor – a sense of lightness about our failings
Subjective Experience of Compassion

• Increased feelings of social closeness
• Increased positive emotions – love, joy, gratitude, contentment, interest
• Less anxiety and depression
• Better self-reported physical health
• Practicing compassion creates upward spiral
Habits that Interfere with Compassion

- “Protecting” ourselves by hardening the heart
- Scanning for threats
- Hope for praise, fear of blame
- Self-criticism
- Repeating the litany of our misery
- Our own fears of being in their situation
Unhelpful Responses

• “I know how you feel.”
• “At least . . . “
• “It could be worse.”
• “Don’t cry.”
Skillful Presence

• It’s *how we are* more than what we say
• Building trust
• Authentic communication
• Fully present
• Kind
Distractions from Authentic Communication

• Judgmental attitude or biases
• Time crunch, focus on past or future tasks
• A need to control the outcome
• Fear of being in their situation, their emotions, conflict
Intention/Motivation

• Begin each day, or each encounter, with an intention to be compassionate
• Every being wants to avoid suffering and to be happy
• Just as we would want to help a cherished friend in distress, we can aspire to help all members of the human family – all could be our friend in other circumstances
• Make your intention into a request or prayer
Perceptions of Others

• Our perceptions are clouded by our own emotions, concepts and judgments

• Taking the other person’s perspective can help us to understand them more clearly
Practice of Loving-Kindness
Loving Kindness

• Start with practicing loving-kindness toward yourself

• Practicing L-K for seven weeks resulted in: increased positive emotions, mindfulness, positive social relations, vagal tone, mental and physical health
Benefit of Compassion

• “Every act of compassion is also an act of self-healing. The pain of witnessing suffering and loss is ameliorated by the deep satisfaction of knowing that your caring makes a huge difference to the patient. In the end we are all imperfect and vulnerable.”

• Dr. Robin Youngson
Recap – Crucial Points

• Helping others helps you.
• If you cannot love yourself, you cannot love another.
• Practice compassion until it is your habit and motivational drive.
Web Resources

– [www.selfcompassion.org](http://www.selfcompassion.org) - test for self compassion

– [www.spcare.org](http://www.spcare.org) - online course for professionals

  *Authentic Presence*

– [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQSWsOORB FY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQSWsOORB FY) - Sharon Salzburg on Loving Kindness meditation

– [www.charterforcompassion.org](http://www.charterforcompassion.org) - international organization encouraging focus on compassion
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