



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

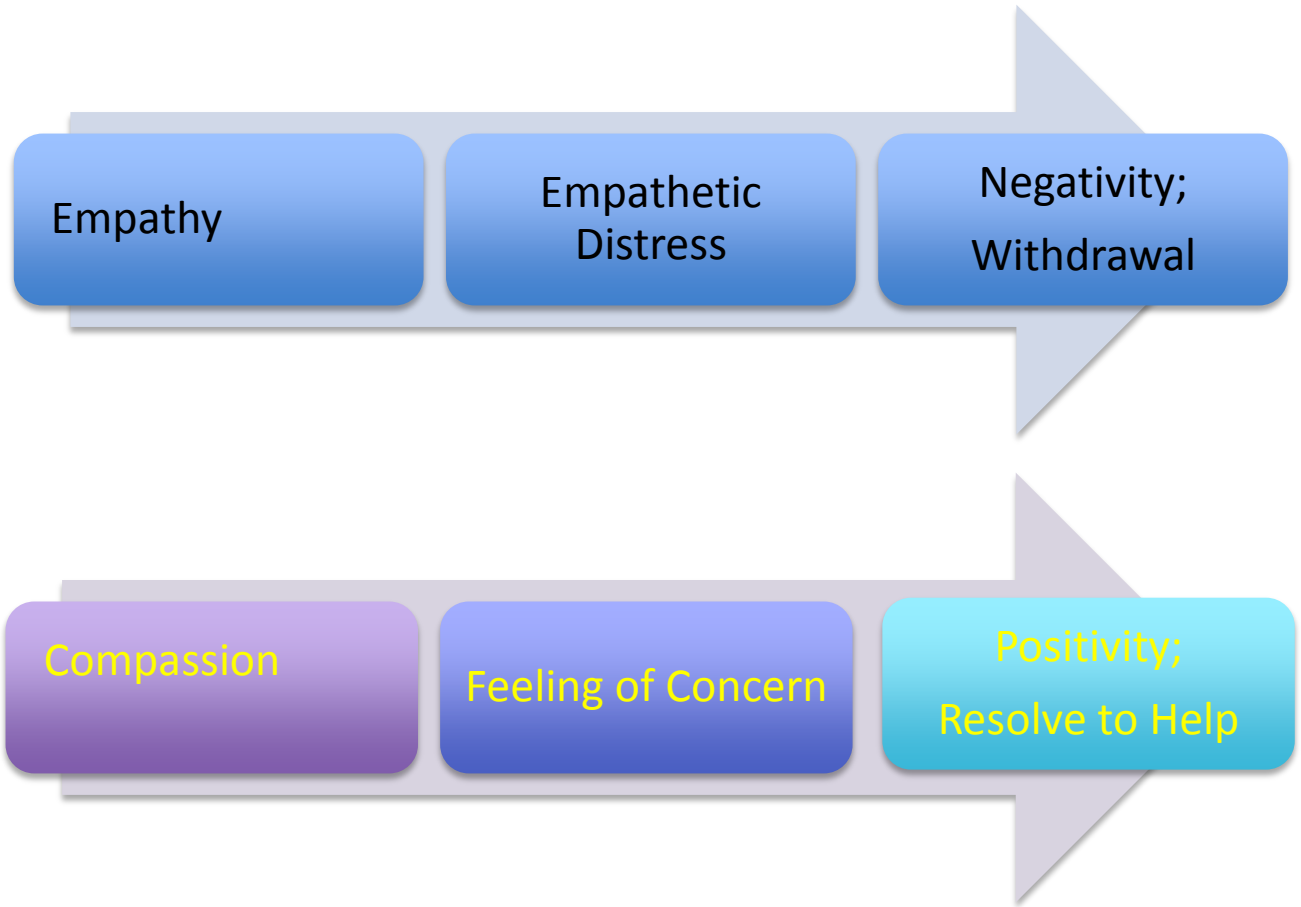


- What *barriers* to compassion are present in our current medical system and culture?

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



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 \approx 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 oneself
- 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 - test for self compassion
- www.spcare.org - online course for professionals
Authentic Presence
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQSWsOORB>
FY- Sharon Salzberg on Loving Kindness
meditation www.charterforcompassion.org -
international organization encouraging focus on
compassion

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