

COMPASSION-AND-COMPASSION

New research is now showing that compassion is much more than just a kind reaction to others suffering, in fact, it is also an essential skill. One that anyone can improve over time to transform their lives and increase their happiness. When we hear the stuff about a tragic event, most of us often feel compelled to respond with compassion. Let us say, organizing a donation-based yoga class to help victims of a natural disaster or making dinner for a close friend who has lost a parent.



We are not only connected to others suffering in these moments, but we also experienced something surprisingly positive. You see when we help someone out of our genuine concern for his or her well-being our levels of endorphins, which are associated with euphoric feelings, surge in our brain, a phenomenon that we call the “helpers High” Thupten Jinpa, who is a PhD, adjunct professor of religious studies at McGill University, who is also the author of A Fearless Heart, and the principal English translator to the Dalai Lama for over three decades.



The warm feelings that we all get from our own compassionate helps relieve oxytocin, which is associated with bonding with others and even reduces some levels of inflammation, that are in the cardiovascular system. Despite the natural healing benefits of compassion, it is not always an automatic response, thanks to the demands of our daily life. However, new research is now showing that we can actually foster our capacity for compassion so that when painful situations arise,

we are better at effectively relating to that person, that is in need.



In a study from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, people who were instructed to listen to a half-hour of compassion meditation training for 2 weeks daily were more generous with their money doing a computer game experiment and had greater activation in the nucleus accumbens, an area of our brain that is associated with pleasure and rewards, compared to those who underwent a different type of training that re-contextualized people's suffering. (to listen to meditation from a Wisconsin study for free go to CenterHealthyMinds.Org)



In order to tap into more compassion, it's always best to start with the type that comes most naturally-for family and good friends. Next, focus on compassion for yourself, (however, it can be surprisingly tough). And finally my friends, practice compassion for some strangers. Just as beginner yogis don't go straight to Astavakrasana (Eight Angle Pose), it is important to build your compassion practice very slowly. These following exercises can help you strengthen your everyday awareness of suffering in both yourself and others. Before you know it, you will be connecting with others in a most meaningful way and making the world that we live in a much better place.



When someone that you really care about is in pain, maybe it will be a friend who has lost his or her job or a family member that is in the hospital-compassion tends to take the form of an offer to share and hopefully relieve that pain. "However, taking on someone's pain is a giant task, especially

if you have pain that you are presently a part of. The true goal of compassion is to be present for what's happening, without ever trying to fix things or absorb the pain yourself. So instead of rushing to make a to-do list, simply offer a sincere hug. It's important to learn to be aware and with the person who is suffering, without wanting to solve the problem itself.



Other times, you may actually be a part of the painful Unwanted event. Let us consider a fight with your dad, in which a phone conversation got heated and you said some things that you really didn't mean. When things cool down, revisit what happened and think about what a more compassionate response would have looked like. Then right before your next call to your dad, think about how you'd like the phone call to go perhaps vowing to use it as an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your dad.



When practicing compassion, your breathing and your heart rate starts to slow, evidence of your calming parasympathetic nervous system at work it puts you in a physiological state that is grounded and centered which is a much better state to make decisions in, says Kelly McGonigal PhD, yoga teacher and co-director at Stanford School of Medicine's Center for compassion and Altruism Research and Education in Palo Alto, California.

Here is an exercise, come on try this, it will be good for you. Let us consider the source, Sometimes we're not able to extend that compassion to our friends and family because we feel like we are under attack ourselves. Think about that heated conversation with your dad: Maybe it was less about

what he said and more about the snarky email that your boss earlier sent to you. The barrage of after hour emails and texts (thanks, smartphones) can rouse our defenses, so we neglect to see the person nearby who needs our compassion. To counter their stressors, create a physical environment that allows you to better connect with people that are important to you. Write down a list of rules just for yourself, such as not checking emails first thing in the morning or setting an email cut off time in the early evening. Make all meals that you share with friends or family totally cell phone free. And if you can, make those work emails off-limits over the weekend, free yourself my friends, you will be so happy that you did.



Compassion researchers say people have an inherent desire to be kind to others. Taking in consideration, that when a newborn baby cries in a hospital nursery, inevitably other babies erupt into wails. However, as we grow up, society teaches us all who deserves our empathy and who does not, says Jinpa. So practicing compassion for others is not about developing a new skill, but rather about reacquainting ourselves with an instinct that we are taught to quell. Let us think of a man, begging for money on the streets. You may want to turn away because seeing how little he has makes you feel a little guilty for what you have or for not doing more to help. But spending a minute talking to this man, even if you don't give him money, gives him the gift of someone caring for him, and this in many cases is better than giving money.



We all live in a competitive world where, from a young age our accomplishments are compared to those of others. It creates an environment where children have a sense of self-worth contingent on other criteria, for example, receiving affection

from parents for good grades and punishment for bad grades, explains Jinpa. As we get older, we tend to confuse selfishness with self-compassion. Women tend to suffer more, because there's a lot more societal pressure to put others first, so a 45-minute yoga class with your favorite yoga instructor or tea with a good friend gets the back burner.

Adding low self-esteem, also epidemic among women and a person starts believing she doesn't deserve self-compassion, Jinpa says. When we allow self-consciousness to usurp self-compassion our lives become less joyful. It can make us all feel uncomfortable in social situations and make us worry that people may be judging us



A great trick for tapping into your self-compassion is through recalling a benefactor moment, an instance in life when we felt seen, heard, and recognized by someone who showed us some genuine regards and affection, says Jinpa. Let us say you are speaking during a big corporate meeting with a colleague talking over you. Now you are questioning yourself if your point even had value. But when he's finished, your boss redirected the conversation back to you, because he truly wanted your take. Benefactor moments like those make us feel valued, so each time that you question your sense of purpose or usefulness, call upon those moments as a reminder that you do have value and, thus, are also deserving of some self-compassion.



My friends, of all the ways for you to straighten self-compassion, yoga is one of the very best. Almost no matter what form you are doing, you are cultivating courage, presence, and compassion through tolerating discomfort, says

McGonigal. By staying in uncomfortable (but not painful) poses forces you to be aware of your body and proud of your courage to hang in there with it. Hip openers, such as the pigeon pose, are affected because they tend to unearth tightness and resistance. Later, when you are out in the world and faced with a difficult situation, you will be able to draw on your experiences in the yoga studio and know that you can handle discomfort for real.



My friends exercise your compassion muscles, by making small gestures towards others is indeed a beautiful thing. Here are a few ideas, volunteer to watch your neighbor's small kids while they're out running errands, if you know someone who lost a parent over the last year, reach out to them on Father's Day or Mother's day just to help get them through some rough times. If you work in an office put random sticky notes with positive slogans on the office refrigerator, or over the water cooler or maybe the mirror in the restroom. Or maybe, even get something nice that you don't need and put it on Craigslist for free. My friends, being compassionate to others is sincerely rewarding.

May you be always in good health.

Humbly yours, Paul Earl

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