

HOW TO REMOVE YOUR BARRIERS TO COMPASSION

We've come a long way from "Survival of the fittest", and the grim view of life it portrayed. We now see evolution as driven at least as much by collaboration as by competition, we have evidence that altruism and empathy are on the rise, and Psychology and Neurobiology have jointly placed Compassion in the center of our personal and collective aspiration for peace, harmony and wellbeing.


This being so, one might wonder why we still suffer from pandemic levels of anxiety, depression and loneliness.

In other words: are we being as compassionate, considerate and caring towards one another as we could be?

And if not, why not?

There has been plenty of research into the deep roots of compassion, and even in some personal characteristics that seem to predispose people towards altruistic behavior.

But outside studies of psychopathy (a mental disorder in which the capacity for empathy is compromised), there have been few investigations into why we sometimes shy away from reaching out to others with compassion, even when we feel the urge.



Here are some suggestions for overcoming those barriers, and connecting with our heart's authentic desire to help.

FINDING OUR WAY TO COMPASSION

1 Stop being **OVERWHELMED**

We may feel more comfortable caring for someone who is ill than talking to someone living on the streets, or vice-versa; we may be more at ease listening to the challenging emotions of a stranger than those of a family member, or the other way around.

But most of us have some degree of discomfort around meeting other people's raw pain. This fear reflects our difficulty in meeting our own tender feelings, of course; after all, not many of us were taught to relate lovingly to our afflictive emotions. But we can teach ourselves.

When you find yourself with a knot in your throat, or a vague sense of anguish, place your hand gently on your heart, offer yourself some genuine words of comfort, and ask yourself:

How could I be kind to myself right now?

If you make a habit of this, your inner life will flourish like a garden. And when you come across someone in distress, it will feel natural to offer them the same loving attention.



2 Find the **WORDS**

Sometimes we worry we won't know what to say to someone in grief, or going through something that we ourselves haven't experienced. Fortunately, we don't need to know exactly what somebody has endured in order to help them hold their pain; we only need to know pain.

We may also be under the misconception that there's something "right" to say that can alleviate another's pain, and that saying the wrong thing could make things worse. The truth is that nothing can take away the sorrow of losing someone or something important. But a hand on one's shoulder can be a soothing balm, and simple words, spoken in a caring tone, can make the weight easier to carry. If nothing else, we can always say:

*I can't imagine how awful you must feel.
Thank you for letting me with you now.*

3 Give the best of **YOU**

Mother Teresa is credited with saying:

I must be willing to give whatever it takes to do good to others. This requires that I be willing to give until it hurts. Otherwise, there is no true love in me, and I bring injustice, not peace, to those around me.

This was surely intended to encourage acts of selfless giving, but it may have done more harm than good.

The idea that an act of care or giving must create pain for the one performing it is somewhat antithetical to the nature of compassion. This emotion (or disposition) includes the perception of pain plus the desire to do what we can to alleviate it, which is love. Love is inherently a joyful state of being, which lifts us out of our self-centeredness and connects us to others. Therefore, an act of compassion usually leaves us in a more joyful state than the one we were in before practicing it; or at least, filled with a sense of meaning and purpose.

You must participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world, said the mythologist Joseph Campbell. And the very same Mother Teresa, in perhaps a more helpful sentiment, declared: *Not all of us can do great things. But we can all do small things with great love.*





4 Maintain your **ENERGY** to act

We're used to thinking of our actions in terms of energy expenditure. We run, we sweep the floor, we do an errand, and we grow tired as a result of the effort, and have less energy for the rest of the day's endeavors.

This is not true of love. Mothers don't run out of devotion when they have a new child.

We don't return from a dinner with friends exhausted. And when we act from compassion, and not mere empathy, we are rewarded with a surplus of energy, not depletion.

Candlelight is an apt metaphor: when we light other candles with our own (as in certain rituals), the result is an ever increasing amount of glow and warmth and light. In the same way, love is a renewable resource, and compassion energizes the giver as much as -if not more- than the receiver.



5 Generate **MORE** energy

Much has been written of the perils of living in our comfort zones. But the fact remains: our brains are wired to conserve energy, and modern-day society encourages us to live in well-guarded bubbles of sameness and repetition.

To reach out to another is to step outside the bubble. Especially with people we don't know well, it's possible they may receive our attention with gratitude, or with rejection. Even if they accept it readily, we never know what awaits on the other side of braving the Unknown. We know, we may even make a friend! Pleasant as this sounds, a small part of us might want to back away, claiming: "Who has the time?" As the painter Georgia O'Keefe eloquently put it:

Nobody sees a flower really, it is so small. We haven't time, and to see takes time - like to have a friend takes time.

So we have a choice.

We can listen to the practical, self-protective warnings of the brain, or we can give in to the wild extravagance of the heart.

Might we come back from our venture a little worse for wear? Possibly. But we'll return with a story, wizened by experience, and heartened by the fact that we attempted to do the thing -the one beautiful and unlikely thing- that we were born to do.



By Fabiana Fondevila, a writer, speaker, ritual maker and teacher. Her work helps individuals bring forth their best selves with wonder and enthusiasm, while exploring the joy and challenge of offering our gifts to the world