

Definitions of Compassion for Define and Notice Compassion Exercise

Definitions

- Paul Gilbert (2017): “Compassion must involve evaluating and providing for needs that prevent suffering.” (p. 10)
- Jennifer L. Goetz, Dacher Keltner, and Emiliana Simon-Thomas (2010): Compassion is “the feeling that arises when witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a desire to help.” (p. 351)
- Hooria Jazaieri, Geshi Thupten Jinpa, Kelly McGonigal, Erika L. Rosenberg, Joel Finkelstein, Emiliana Simon-Thomas, Margaret Cullen, James R. Doty, James J. Gross, and Phillippe R. Goldin (2012): Compassion has four components, including (1) awareness of suffering, (2) sympathetic concern, (3) an intention to see relief, and (4) a responsiveness to relieve suffering.

Research Insights

Compassion exists from the beginning of life: Infants’ pupils widen when someone appears in need, demonstrating compassion. Their pupils shrink when the person is no longer in need there (Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O’Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2012). Another study asked children as young as two to give other people treats and to receive treats. Giving the treats increased happiness more than receiving treats (Aknin, Hamlin, & Dunn, 2012). Similar research finds that peoples’ instincts are to help rather than to compete with others (Rand, Greene, & Nowak, 2012).

Stress diminishes: Abraham Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs theory is that a person must have several needs met, including physical and emotional safety, a sense of belonging and certainty, and other states. In the absence of compassion, a student’s educational experience is diminished, and they experience stress. Compassion lowers a student’s stress, enabling a focus on learning. Additionally, kindness—a form of compassion—can counteract bullying and violence (Clark & Marinak, 2010).

Focusing on others helps prevent illness: Focusing on ourselves can lead to narcissism, depression, and anxiety (Watkins & Moulds, 2005). Compassion is a way to focus on others. Also, when we are compassionate, we are less likely to be isolated, which contributes to depression, obesity, high blood pressure, and disease (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Social connections, such as those that accompany compassionate responses, improve our immune systems and help us recover more quickly from illness (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Aknin, L. B., Hamlin, J. K., & Dunn, E. W. (2012). Giving leads to happiness in young children. PLoS One, 7(6), e39211.

Dunfield, K., Kuhlmeier, V. A., O’Connell, L., & Kelley, E. (2011). Examining the diversity of prosocial behavior: Helping, sharing, and comforting in infancy. Infancy, 16(3), 227–247.

Fredrickson, B. L., Grewen, K. M., Coffey, K. A., Algoe, S. B., Firestone, A. M., Arevalo, J. M., et al. (2013). A functional genomic perspective on human well-being. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 110(33), 13684–13689.

Hepach, R., Vaish, A., & Tomasello, M. (2012). Young children are intrinsically motivated to see others helped. Psychological Science, 23(9), 967–972.

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A metaanalytic review. PLoS Medicine, 7(7), e1000316.

Jazaieri, H., Jinpa, G., McGonigal, K., Rosenberg, E., Finkelstein, J., Simon-Thomas, E., et al. (2012). Enhancing compassion: A randomized controlled trial of a Compassion Cultivation Training program. Journal of Happiness Studies, 14(4), 1113–1126.

Rand, D. G., Greene, J. D., & Nowak, M. A. (2012). Spontaneous giving and calculated greed. Nature, 489, 427–430.

Watkins, E. D., & Moulds, M. (2005). Distinct modes of ruminative self-focus: Impact of abstract versus concrete rumination on problem solving in depression. Emotion, 5(3), 319–328.