Common Humanity: The Basis for Unbiased Universal Compassion

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Goals for the workshop

1. Learn about the research showing compassion is a positive state of mind and enhances the wellbeing of the giver

2. Understand the difference between compassion, empathy, pity & sympathy

3. Develop strategies to cultivate compassion and avoid empathic distress

4. Strengthen the perception of common humanity in day-to-day work

5. Learn strategies for managing when compassion is challenged
Compassion as a Core Value

Compassion Definition:

A sense of concern that arises when we are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to see that suffering relieved (Jinpa 2016)

• Compassion is a core value in healthcare and for health professionals.

• Compassion is a virtue in all cultures - holds an elevated status due to its inclusiveness of all humans.

Compassion taps into the sentiments of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”
Compassion research in the last 2 decades

1. A positive state of mind, leads to feelings of warmth, concern, reward and affiliation (Klimecki et al. 2013; Preckel et al. 2018)

2. Compassion can be trained (Leiberg et al. 2011, Weng et al. 2013)

3. Compassion leads to a range of prosocial outcomes including increased caring behaviors, social connectedness, altruism (Hofmann et al. 2011; Mayseless 2011; Preston 2013)

5. Compassion leads to less stress in the caregiver (Dahl, Lutz & Davidson 2015)

6. Compassion has a positive impact on those who witness and receive it (Kanov et al. 2004)

7. Compassion reduces the desire to punish the other (Condon & De Steno 2011)

8. Compassion and empathy use different neural pathways (Klimecki et al. 2013)
Compassion and empathy are not the same

**Compassion** is an other-focused emotion and a positive neural pathway. It arises in response to another’s suffering and encompasses a wish to relieve the other’s suffering.

**Empathy** – where we are affected by and share another’s emotions – can go down two paths – one positive, the other negative.

1. **Empathic concern**, which is other-focused, is positive. It is similar to compassion.

2. **Empathic distress**, where you overidentify with another’s suffering and either imagine their pain or you become distressed by their suffering, is a negative neural pathway. It becomes personal distress. Empathic distress is self-focused.
The term “Compassion Fatigue” is now understood to be incorrectly named, it is actually “Empathic Distress Fatigue”


Self – Other Distinction

Be careful, empathic distress can turn into self-focused personal distress

Compassion is always focused on the other, it is a positive state of mind for the giver
Share in the chat box – exercise 1

Share an example when you were distressed by someone else’s suffering – what was the situation?
Now share an example when you knew someone was suffering but you were able to keep your focus and concern on them – what was the situation?
Health care workers are confronted with people’s suffering on a daily basis. It’s protective to learn how to generate compassion rather than accidentally going into empathic distress or numbness.

Practice focusing on compassion, make it a positive habit.

Reflection – we need to flick between self and other focus many times per day
Practicing cultivating and sustaining compassion benefits everyone

Health care workers benefit, patients benefit and the health care organization benefits.
Compassion is a “wish” for the other’s suffering to be relieved, it precedes action

- You can still have compassion for someone where you are not successful in directly preventing their suffering e.g. starving children in Africa.

- The important point is that the arising of compassion in yourself is still a positive state of mind and better than empathic distress. It’s protective against health care worker burnout.

- Compassion precedes prosocial action, but it’s a fact of life that we can’t always prevent the suffering of others.
People commonly have compassion for their close others and those they care about.

However, compassion towards strangers varies between people. Health care workers ideally would have compassion towards every patient they care for.

Influential research into why some people risk their lives to rescue complete strangers. Kristen Renwick Monroe (1998) interviewed people who had rescued Jewish people in Nazi occupied Europe during WW2.

All of the rescuers reported they did it out of a sense of a “common humanity”, “you see another person suffering and you go and help”.
Importance of the Perception of Common Humanity

• Suggestion that the perception of common humanity is the core component of compassion (Blum 1980; Cassell 2009; Jinpa 2016; Nussbaum 1996; Van Der Cingel 2009)

• Common humanity breaks down barriers, everyone becomes the “in-group”, value every other human being (Von Dietze & Orb 2000)

• Recognition of human suffering as a universal phenomenon. Anyone can get sick or injured (Feldman & Kuyken 2011; Strauss et al. 2016)

• Perception of common humanity is helpful for health care workers – it improves health care worker well-being and makes it easy to have compassion for every patient.
Compassion, which is considered a virtue, is notable as it does not make distinctions based on the “deservingness” of the recipient.

All humans are worthy of compassion by virtue of their basic humanity.

Hospitals provide care to someone who is injured irrespective of whether the person caused an accident through illegal activity or is the innocent victim of the accident.
The Compassion Process

1. **Do I notice the other?**
   - YES

2. **Is the other suffering?**
   - YES

3. **Do I empathise with them?**
   - YES
   - Empathic Concern
   - (Other-focus)
   - Continue

4. **No one wants to suffer**
   - YES

5. **Do I recognise common humanity?**
   - YES

6. **I wish for their suffering to be alleviated**
   - COMPASSION

7. **Empathic Distress Exit**
   - (Self-focus)

   “Just like me, this person wishes to be happy and not to suffer”
5 scenarios capturing common humanity

1. Danish TV2 Advertisement “All that we share” (released January 2017 – 8 million views).

2. Danish TV2 Advertisement “All that we share – connected” (released March 2019).

3. Humanitarian Lifeguard.


5. Wes Autrey, father of 2, who leaps onto the subway tracks to save a fellow passenger.
TV2 Danmark (2017) TV 2/All that we share
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc
TV2 Danmark (2019) TV2/All that we share – connected
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQ15cqP-K80
1. What resonated for you in these Danish TV videos?

2. Share reflections/thoughts on your connectedness to others.
Charter for Compassion Australia (2016) Australian lifesaver Simon Lewis helps refugees. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKDbJmBdF-0
In the chat box

Share any thoughts/comments on the Lifeguard video.
Qualitative comments from health care workers on the Lifeguard video and Danish TV advertisements

“That all of us just want to be loved and live happily”

“Put yourself in their place”

“Find the commonality between myself and another”

“To remember they are ‘just like me’ with the same hopes and fears”

“Try to imagine others’ perspectives, we are all human”

“Looking at common human traits”

“Reflecting on others’ feelings and others’ points of view”
US inmates who saved guard’s life to have sentences cut (2017, June 21) BBC News

The prisoners’ heroic actions have earned them each a shortened prison sentence

Six US prisoners are being rewarded for saving a prison officer who had suffered a suspected heart attack.
Man is Rescued by Stranger on Subway Tracks (2007, Jan 3) New York Times
https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/03/nyregion/03life.html

The New York Times

Man Is Rescued by Stranger on Subway Tracks

By Cara Buckley

Jan. 3, 2007

It was every subway rider’s nightmare, times two.

Who has ridden along New York’s 656 miles of subway lines and not wondered: “What if I fell to the tracks as a train came in? What would I do?”

And who has not thought: “What if someone else fell? Would I jump to the rescue?”

Wesley Autrey, a 50-year-old construction worker and Navy veteran, faced both those questions in a flashing instant yesterday,
Useful Common Humanity Slogans

“Just like me, this person wishes to be happy and not to suffer” (Stanford Compassion Cultivation Training)

“This person is someone’s mother, father, son, daughter”

“Anyone can get sick at any time, this person could be me (or my mother, father etc)”

“You today. Me Tomorrow”.
Recognising the source of others’ difficult behaviours

“All unskilful behaviour is the tragic expression of an unmet need” – Marshall Rosenberg, founder of Non violent Communication.

When people behave in challenging ways, it’s usually because they are afraid of something or worried/anxious.
Humans are a social species.

From our first moments as newborn babies, others have cared for us, taught us and fed us.

We are connected with others in so many ways – helpful to reflect on this regularly and remind ourselves of this fact.
Think of all the people who have ever helped, supported or had a positive influence on you in any way whatsoever (not just key caregivers).

It can even be quite a fleeting interchange.

Share in the Chat Box.
Developed, trialled and evaluated single session compassion training intervention on health care workers. Pre/post intervention study investigating the impact of viewing common humanity scenarios on health care workers’ level of compassion. Used validated scales on perspective taking, common humanity and compassion. Collected quantitative and qualitative data.

https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2020.1808031

https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz124

Compassion Quotes

“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion.
If you want to be happy, practice compassion” – Dalai Lama

“Compassion is the basis of all morality” – Arthur Schopenhauer

“Simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your greatest treasures” – Lao Tzu

“The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others” – Albert Schweitzer
References


Questions and Answers?

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