



## Empathy and Compassion: A pathway to healing

Empathy and compassion are two words often used interchangeably but have unique characteristics, both being important in the quest for healing. Empathy has been defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person, to sense their emotions. It has been described as 'putting yourself in the shoes of the other', imagining what they think and feel. Empathy can arise automatically when witnessing another in a painful or distressing situation. A process in our neurological makeup kicks in and mirror neurons fire off, allowing us to feel empathy for the other person.

Compassion moves a step further and embraces a willingness to help ease the suffering of another. It means to stay present with the pain of the other and to listen without judgement.

As therapists, counsellors, teachers or spiritual care providers, it is part of our role to be able to empathize with our clients, students or community members, and respond with compassion. For us to respond well and avoid 'compassion fatigue', good self care is essential. This includes good nutrition and physical exercise. Other approaches to calm the mind are equally important. For example a way to approach a situation which has the potential of being emotionally draining is proposed by Ashley Davis Bush. (1) She suggests a daily routine to help one become centered and energized to start the day with purpose. "Placing hands on various parts of the body you send out a request: May I heal others...may I listen...may I see clearly...may I speak kindly...may my heart be open."

Some practices that are simple to learn and use are self soothing techniques to calm the nervous system when one feels overloaded. Box breathing\* and visualization of a peaceful place are methods which tend to calm the mind and body. A mindfulness practice, which takes time to develop and practice, may also be very helpful.

As well as having a positive outcome, empathy may also constitute excessive sharing of others' negative emotions which can be maladaptive and constitute a source of burnout. This is caused by brain neuroplasticity, meaning our minds become what they rest upon, or is our focus of attention. Rick Hanson (2) describes the advantages of focusing on what goes well and is good in our lives. The acronym HEAL covers the four steps.

- Have a good experience or notice one you have had.
- Enrich the experience by focusing on it, expanding it and feeling it all over again.
- Absorb the experience by imaging you are pulling it in like a sponge.
- Link the experience by letting the positive aspects overlay a negative.

Training in handling compassion for those of us in a caregiving role is becoming more recognized as a critical component of our work. It reflects a proactive strategy to build the strength to be present with suffering, the courage to take compassionate action, and the resilience to prevent compassion fatigue. One such approach is called Compassion Cultivation Training, developed by the Stanford School of Medicine to address the high rate of burnout of practitioners and students in the medical profession. Research has demonstrated that training in mindfulness and self compassion lowers the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue, as well as increases job satisfaction. (4)

Empathy and compassion are key components when relating to someone, whether a family member, friend, community member, student, colleague, client, or patient, who is distressed in some respect. It allows a troubled or anxious person to feel connected with a caring other, not isolated in their pain. This accompaniment can have a profound healing effect. As therapists at IFL, we are aware of the importance of empathy and compassion in our work.

The well-known writer, Father Henri Nouwen, writes that, "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand."(3)

May we as therapists, caregivers, clergy and friends, be people of empathy and compassion in our families and communities.

*by Lindsay Watson, M.A., RP, RMFT*

### References:

1 A. Davis Bush (2015) Simple Self Care for Therapists: Restorative Practices to Weave through your Workday W.W.Norton

2 Rick Hanson (2013) Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm and Confidence. New York Harmony

3 H. Nouwen (2004) Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life. Ave Maria Press

4 Scarlet, J., Altmeyer, N., Knier, S., & Harpin, R. E. (2017). The effects of Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) on health-care workers. *Clinical Psychologist*, 21, 116–124. doi:10.1111 /cp.12130

\* Box breathing refers to the calming technique where a deep breathe is taken in to the count of 4, held for the count of 4, exhaled to the count of 4 and paused to the count of 4. This exercise is repeated until a sense of calm and relaxation is achieved.



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