

Compassion and Wellbeing: Evidence

Executive Summary

For the past 20 years or so, the importance of compassion has been increasingly recognised as an area of study by researchers in fields as diverse as psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and pedagogy. Recent research has focused on the key role of compassion in human evolution and its importance in the development of individuals during their lifespan. Evidence has demonstrated clearly the strikingly positive impact of compassion on individual wellbeing and mental health. It also shows how vital compassion is to society's connectedness and cohesion. During this time, it has become increasingly widely accepted that compassion is a skill and mindset that can be not just learned but also maintained and enhanced by a number of different activities and interventions.

Introduction

Compassion has been promoted by wisdom traditions for millennia but has only been studied in detail by scientists comparatively recently. Their research has focused mainly on short-term training for students, employers or people with emotional disorders. These interventions have been found to be good for the practitioner – leading to higher wellbeing, less stress and anxiety, less self-criticism and shame – as well as good for society. They lead to more prosocial and altruistic behaviour.

'If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.' -His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Evolution and the science of compassion

Compassion is considered by many scientists to be an evolutionary response to others (Goetz et al. 2010) and has been observed in several animal species, as well as in infant human beings. This recent research on the significance of compassion began with a reappraisal of Darwin's foundational work, *The Expression Of Emotion In Man And Animals* (1872). Darwin believed that sympathy, created by a need to nurture and protect infants was a key driver in human evolution. Recent studies have explored this idea further using modern neuroscientific techniques to understand the biology of compassion.

One recent study (Geangu 2011) found that infants' pupils would increase in size —a sign of concern— when they saw someone in need, while their pupils would shrink when they were able to help that person—or, crucially, when they saw someone else help. This suggests that they felt better not merely because they got the feelings of reward or credit that come from helping. Instead, they seemed to care primarily that the person's suffering was alleviated, whether or not they were the ones alleviating that suffering themselves.

In research by Emory University neuroscientists James Rilling and Gregory Berns (2002), participants were given a chance to help someone else while their brain activity was recorded. Assisting others to

triggered action in portions of the brain that are activated when people receive rewards or experience pleasure. This is a rather remarkable finding: helping others brings the same pleasure we get from the gratification of personal desire.

The need to create and sustain complex social connections in child-rearing and other prehistory activities has seemingly given humans a predisposition for empathy, kindness, and compassion. This has, however, been challenged by the increased individualism of modern society. As a result, we see many adverse outcomes in the form of increased anxiety, depression and isolation. The research shows that by reaffirming our understanding and practice of compassion in daily life, we can regrow our connections with others, thereby increasing our own wellbeing and cohesion within the communities in which we live.

Can you learn compassion?

There is a broad consensus that compassion can be taught to adults and children by a variety of different interventions, courses and activities. These include compassion meditation, where individuals imaginatively place themselves in another person's situation to develop compassion towards them. Such techniques are also used to foster self-compassion, help people reduce critical self-talk and rumination, and foster greater self-acceptance. These have been developed into formats such as Compassion Focused Therapy, Compassion Cultivation Training and Mindful Self Compassion used in therapeutic and professional settings.

There is also a broad academic consensus that ethics education can play an important role in fostering the development of compassion and altruism (Nucci et al. 2014, cf. Killen 2007). We have identified over sixty studies on ethics education interventions, with a large majority finding that these interventions had significant positive effects. Available evidence suggests that the benefits of ethics education are maximised by a 'cognitively rich' approach, with a stress on critical reasoning (cf. Garcia-Moriyon et al. 2005; Trickey and Topping 2010).

Compassion, wellbeing and other outcomes

Since then, empirical studies have suggested that compassionate/ altruistic, behaviour is a strong predictor of individual wellbeing. Studies show that happiness, positive affect, and reduced negative affect and anxiety (Schwartz 2003; Post 2005; Pressman et al. 2014) are all outcomes of compassionate behaviours. Several studies show that interventions fostering such behaviour leads directly to positive mental health outcomes (Kerr et al. 2014; Otake et al. 2006; Pressman et al. 2014). These studies tend to confirm Neal Weiner's (1993) argument that mental health research shows a remarkable convergence between classical ethics, contemporary virtue ethics, socio-biology and the presuppositions of psychotherapy. A striking number of studies also provide evidence to show the physical health benefits of compassionate behaviours (Luks, 1988; Anderson 2003; Brown 2003; Pillemer 2010).

In the past 10 years, studies have further indicated that not only do activities such as volunteering and community service improve individuals' mental and physical health but that showing greater self-

compassion and empathy helps create greater social cohesion and strengthens peoples' interconnectedness.

- A longitudinal study at Berkley University of 850 people (Poulin et al. 2013) found that volunteerism reduced stress and improved resilience in response to life crises:
- A study of 1700 doctors, nurses and medical students (Dev et al. 2020) found that those who scored high in measures of self-compassion were less likely to suffer stress and burn out
- This study found that compassion is contagious (Fowler and Christakis 2010) – acts of generosity inspire similar acts in others:

Further studies have demonstrated that compassion training through activities such as Cultivation Training (CCT) improved resilience and reduced interpersonal conflict in healthcare workers (Scarlet et al. 2017). Other trials of CCT (Jazaieri 2017) found even limited course of study lowered anxiety, and increased calmness and a greater acceptance of difficult emotions and experiences. This study of (Neff & Germer 2013) Mindful Self-Compassion found it led to significant increases in self-compassion, mindfulness, and wellbeing outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction). Finally, a study by Leiberger (2011) asking whether compassion training actually improves prosocial behaviour strongly suggests that it does.

How Compassion Matters integrates this research into its courses

The guiding principle of compassion matters is the power that compassion has to make a meaningful and positive change to the lives of children.

[Compassion Matters](#) (CM) draws together the ideas and research in this document to form Compassion Education. Our learning materials are underpinned by ethical and values education content developed by philosophers and ethicists from leading universities. This content enables children to critically explore universal ideals such as compassion, courage, happiness, wisdom allowing them to better understand the meaning behind being human in a way that is accessible and is relevant to their own lives.

CM also draws on social-emotional learning principals set out by Emory University's [SEE Learning](#) project. This allows children to learn emotional awareness, literacy and regulation skills, ensuring they can practice greater self-compassion and kindness.

We have also included elements of [Compassion Cultivation Training](#) (CCT) including compassion meditation and thinking activities which have been shown to support improved wellbeing and prosocial behaviour.

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