

Compassion vs Empathy

Many of us in the helping professions have been trained and encouraged to utilize the skill of empathy in our work. Empathy is the ability to “feel with” the other who is struggling which means that we feel in our own bodies what the other is feeling. Over time this is depleting on the helper. Compassion, on the other hand, is energizing. Compassion is the ability to notice suffering combined with the desire to want to alleviate that suffering. It has an action component to it. In fact brain scan imaging of those who are actively sending compassion to a suffering other show that the motor planning centers of the brain are activated. Acts of kindness and well wishes benefit not only the sufferer because they are receiving care, concern and perhaps practical help but the helper is also energized by this connection. Research shows that when one witnesses an act of compassion, receives an act of compassion or gives an act of compassion oxytocin is released. Oxytocin is a hormone that connects people and it counteracts adrenalin and cortisol which are hormones that fuel the stress response. The steps to cultivate compassion are as follows:

1. Become Mindful: mindfulness skills not only help us to notice the struggle or suffering but help us to be spacious or open enough to walk alongside the suffering without taking it on as our own or amplifying it with rumination or getting lost in a story about it
2. Recognizing Common Humanity: or that we are all in this together. That struggle and suffering happens to all of us. This helps us to feel less isolated and curb the tendency to judge or blame.
3. Sending or engaging in acts of Kindness: or taking action to assist or alleviate suffer even in some small way such as fully listening to someone’s struggle. Often we cannot “fix” someone else’s struggle but we can always offer a kind gesture or well wish. Do not underestimate the power of kind thoughts and acts.