

Introduction to the Compassion Handbook:

A guide to being a warrior for positive change

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As a researcher, teacher and human service practitioner I have had the opportunity, over the last 3 decades, to explore many facets of the term compassion. Most of my work focused on those aspects of compassion that are most difficult define, including empathy and advanced aspects of compassion associated with gifted healers and mystics. These were people who were warriors for positive change and often heroes of compassion as they facilitated the compassion space for others. Over the past few years I have seen the need to build a bridge between these advanced aspects of compassion and the everyday need for compassion in our lives. This book is an attempt to build that bridge and to help each of us become facilitators of the compassion space and warriors for positive change.

Why is it important to have a handbook on compassion? The reasons are twofold. First, there is no single instruction manual on compassion for people who enter into human service. Second, there is no guidebook, for people in Western culture, to show people the possibilities of advanced compassion development and what that can mean for moving toward a culture of compassion. The primary goal of this book is to lay out the basic principles for understanding and practicing compassion as well as pointing the direction toward more developed aspects of compassion. The secondary goal is to provide compassionate people with the tools to not only develop strong compassion but to also speak with strength and wisdom about the necessity of compassion.

Since much of my previous writings are tied to a foundation of literature review and research, this book will make reference to those writings. It will also include many of the basic papers that are on the web pages of www.CompassionSpace.com although edited to fit within the context of this handbook. The papers on the website are loosely tied together. In this book the ideas presented on the website will be more coherently linked together. This is the bridge that has not yet been built for people seeking to help one another in our Western culture. This is a bridge that will help us face the seven myths of compassion and their consequences. These are myths intertwined with our culture and they interfere in the development of compassion throughout our culture.

The **first myth** is that compassion is common sense and just needs to be done. There is nothing else that we have to learn. By using the term myth it is implied that these mental formulations about compassion are stories that circulate within society and serve as a common point of understanding. Compassion is often viewed as something that people have or don't have and it can't be taught. This is the **second myth**. The first and the second myths of compassion are linked to how one defines, understands and practices compassion.

This handbook will start off discussing the definition of compassion. In my travels I have asked people to define compassion and found that that across the public there are a wide variety of definitions. To help face what might seem like contradictions in this broad range of definitions, this book will offer the reader several presentations that explore the issues around defining compassion. The first issue involves exploring the assumptions which underlie the term compassion. These are explored in the first chapter “A Philosophy of Compassion”. Before we can explore any aspect of compassion, whether to do research, to teach others, or to practice it when helping, we should look quite closely at how we define the term and that includes any assumptions inherent in that term.

Having a philosophy of compassion is what underlies belief in the importance of compassion. There are seven assumptions discussed. These seven assumptions will be tied to the further investigations made into compassion throughout this book and its use within our society. Assumptions are statements that are assumed to be an approximation of truth by way of observation, deduction and a common knowledge within society. They are not substantiated by empirical evidence, yet serve as postulates for future research investigation. They serve as the foundation for presenting a discussion about our general understanding of compassion. In addition they provide a foundation upon which one can build a knowledge base about how we know, practice and teach compassion.

After the assumptions there will be a chapter on “How Do We Define Compassion?” This chapter will present the results of a survey asking people to define compassion. The results of the survey will be compared to the “Theory of Compassion Development”. This chapter sets the ground work for describing what are a spectrum of phenomena that fall under the term compassion.

After the definition of compassion has been laid down within a new theory, and the philosophical assumptions clarified, it will be possible to discuss the various compassion phenomena and what possible avenues can be used to teach compassion. This will be the next chapter in the handbook. Developing an understanding of the spectrum of compassion phenomena that can occur within the compassion space is helpful when facing the myth that compassion has no influence over the events in today’s hectic, and seemingly violent, society.

The **third myth** of compassion is that there is nothing that can be done to improve compassion in the world. The world is “getting worse”, there is “violence everywhere”, and even though I consider myself compassionate, as one person there is nothing I can do to change that. This is linked to the **fourth myth** that states discussing compassion does not make a difference in its practice in the world.

Once the ground work has been laid under the term compassion, it will be important to address why do we need to have a discourse about compassion. There are some people who say that there is no need to talk about compassion, just do it. There are dangerous problems associated with such a stance when compassion silence is drowned out by counter dialog. Most people agree that our world needs more compassion, but what seems to be missing is a visible voice of compassion that permeates society. What is missing is a culture of compassion. If you are reading this you may already recognize the importance of compassion, but you may not realize the need for a strong compassion voice and the need to develop

the compassion space. If you do know that compassion needs a strong voice then this handbook may provide you with some tools, words, and wisdom for strengthening that voice.

The **fifth myth** is that it is possible to have too much compassion and that this can create unhealthy relationships, with self and with others. Compassion is not just a thought, or a meditative state, but it is a relationship of helping. There is an aspect of compassion that involves relationship and within that is the compassion space. The next chapter, following the one about the need for discourse, is about the fundamentals of the helping relationship. It is taken from my book “The Healing Relationship” and modified to fit this discussion of compassion. The fifth myth come with the idea that too much compassion can lead to “compassion fatigue” and unhealthy for the self. It also comes with the idea that too much compassion can lead to “crossing over professional boundaries”. Information linking the foundations of the helping relationship to the fundamental criteria that define compassion and the compassion space will help to clarify the role of compassion within helping relationships.

The **sixth myth** is that compassion is too soft, it has no power to change the destructive nature of man which appears to be the path we seem to be headed on. What is needed is “tough love”. This is strengthened by the **seventh myth** which states that passion is more important than compassion. It is the idea that it is more important to have passion, to be driven, to fight for what is right, to strive for success, than it is to show compassion. It is better to show you are right with might than is it to lighten the load of others. These two myths, as with all the myths of compassion, are based in an underdeveloped understanding of the nature of compassion and the compassion space. Each person comes to their own understanding of compassion through their own world view, their history of experiences with compassion, and their exposure to ideas about compassion. This book will provide information to help people examine these seven myths and to also have a foundation for opening dialog with others about these seven myths of compassion.

Compassion Fatigue – Myth or Misnomer?

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress syndrome, has been around since 1950 but recently has been gaining in popular usage with in human service settings. The term, as it implies, means somehow people will get fatigue from compassion and that gradually their ability to show compassion decreases. One theory behind this is the idea of “vicarious traumatization” (Figley, 1982) which simply means that the person is internally traumatized by the suffering they encounter and this eventually results in burnout along with decreased compassion for others. There are many research articles on the topic, websites, and books. There is no doubt that care givers show signs of burnout. There is no doubt that people who have been through trauma and then witness it again may re-experience the effects. Vietnam War veterans clearly demonstrated this and we are seeing it again as our soldiers come back from the Gulf War. There is something happening that contributes to a decrease in compassion but can we attribute it to compassion phenomena?

Let’s assume that you are a human service provider and you are helping others. Every day you interact with people, you hear their suffering, and you act wisely to reduce their suffering (a definition of compassion). In addition people respond well to you. They always seem to leave with a smile, feeling

better, happier and with less suffering. It has always been that way for you. Imagine that this is your life as a human service worker. Now ask – “Would compassion result in fatigue?”

It is not likely that it is compassion that is creating the fatigue but rather a range of other issues connected to the process of care giver stress and burnout (which is discussed in more detail in another paper, see this link http://www.sacredhealingnow.com/Other_Papers.html). There is research (see the following link) <http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=1996-15656-001&CFID=5803027&CFTOKEN=77309588> to support the link between a person’s trauma history and their risk of burnout. This is not fatigue due to compassion but due to burnout issues. The problem is that the term “compassion fatigue” is catchy, it strikes a chord with people, and it is easier to remember than secondary traumatic stress syndrome. Catchy also sells – books, magazines, workshops and seminars. All of this could eventually lead compassion fatigue into the realm of cultural myth, something accepted as “truth” by the average population without serious inquiry. I am not sure we have reached that point.

Compassion fatigue is not yet a cultural myth but it should be considered a misnomer. The term gives the impression that it is the act of compassion which leads to the fatigue when actually the act of compassion does the opposite. What is creating the fatigue are all of the elements related to human service worker stress and burnout. If we, as compassionate people, can clearly recognize that difference then we will also recognize the term compassion fatigue as a misnomer that is misleading and possibly dangerous. The danger is that the blame for the stress is being placed on acting with compassion rather than on all the various triggers connected to care giver burnout.

This handbook is designed to help strengthen the reader’s compassion and that will be problematic if the reader believes that compassion somehow causes fatigue. Compassion is a powerful force for change but it is also relational (see the next chapter on philosophy). This means that we are responsible only for our part in the compassion process. This handbook will hopefully help the reader to become strong in owning just that part.

*****This is just a draft of the Introduction with my thoughts on how to proceed. It will be expanded, and most likely changed, as the book actually gets written. Check the date of the update at the top of this document.*****

References

Figley, C.R. (1982). Traumatization and comfort: Close relationships may be hazardous to your health. Keynote presentation, Families and close relationships: Individuals in social interaction. Conference held at the Texas Tech University, Lubbock, March.