

An Introduction to Compassion

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The words compassion and empathy get thrown around as much as the words love and kindness and yet we, as a collective society, have not come to a consensus on what these words mean. Perhaps we will never reach consensus simply due to the relational nature of the topics, because everyone experiences relationship in their own way. But it is important to engage in thoughtful and meaningful discourse about these topics. If we don't then it is likely the terms will become defined for us by the media, by our traumatic relationship history, or simply by our ignorance.

The central purpose of the website www.CompassionSpace.com is to offer the global community an opportunity to expand discourse on the topics of empathy and compassion. It is an effort to break free of the limited media definitions and maybe even expand our own personal definitions. The information presented will hopefully present people with the opportunity to develop their knowledge of compassion and perhaps improve the research on compassion, improve its practice and move toward a culture of compassion.

A Simple Definition

Compassion can be defined simply as the ability and willingness to help others who are suffering. This means that we need to hear another's suffering, not just imagine it or think about it. Hearing another's suffering, or sitting with their suffering, involves empathy. Both empathy and compassion are relational phenomenon, which means that we come to learn about them through our relationships with others and ourselves. In addition compassion and empathy are both intertwined with human developmental processes, which means that some people continue to develop compassion as they move through life. It is something we have all seen – that there are people in the world who demonstrate more compassion than others. The **compassion space** can be developed to incorporate the direct experience of healing, of moving through suffering and of divine enlightenment (see www.SacredHealingNow.com for an expanded discussion). This offers a glimpse of a path for all of us, the path of well developed compassion that has the strength to change the nature of suffering and move us toward a culture of compassion.

What Gets in the Way?

There are many things that get the way of expanding our understanding of compassion but the central two factors are the lack of discourse and not passing it on. Compassion is a relational phenomenon and as such its development is linked to relational processes. We need to talk about it and share it with others if we are to expand both our knowledge and practice of it. This seems quite obvious, compassion is helping others with suffering and so the more we do that the more we learn about it. In addition the more we share what we have learned the more others may improve their practice of compassion.

But there is a major roadblock to this common sense approach – fear! There is the fear that maybe if we look at our own sense of compassion we will discover that we are not as compassionate as we could become and that might mean we are “failures”. There is the fear of sitting with suffering and the pain which that causes, including revisiting past relationship trauma. There is the fear of sitting with another from whom we sense a deep compassionate presence because it might expose something in us. And there is the fear of being manipulated by a charismatic person clothed in the cloak of compassion. These are all real and present experiences that can enter into a relationship which seeks to explore and develop a compassion space.

The other most common roadblock to sitting in a compassion space is our own thinking. Often when we engage in conversation with another we are thinking about what to say, what did the person mean by that, what personal experiences are similar, and what can I say that will impact on this relationship (often in an effort to make the pain go away). Sometimes our thinking has to address the fears that invade, taking over without mercy. Sometimes our thoughts have to address the relationship history we carry with us that appears when the compassion space is presented to us. We are so used to having our minds race around checking every corner, every closet, making sure that we can be safe that we often don’t even know it is happening. We don’t know that this prevents us from entering the compassion space. Our minds need to “know”, to feel safe with what will happen within the compassion space before we arrive. We are often busy thinking so we can know so we can feel safe and so we never arrive.

Throughout the ages it has been said that letting go and a quiet mind are part of the path to enlightenment. It is also said that compassion with others is like a relationship with the divine. But understanding how all of these things intertwine to help us develop compassion and move toward a culture that fosters compassion is something we, as a society, are just beginning to touch upon.

What Can We Do?

The first thing we can do is realize that compassion is developmental and that most of us can develop beyond where we are currently. This doesn’t mean that we are “failures” at being compassionate. It just means we can stretch ourselves further than most of us have ever imagined. Most of the writings on advanced compassion (refer to the website) speak to us about the nature of this enlightened path of deep, radiant compassion. We should also realize that there are individuals who are “gifted” with respect to compassion. We can learn from them in a profound way.

We can seek to expand our understanding of compassion by reading what people have to say. This is one of the main functions of www.CompassionSpace.com. Because compassion is developmental what will appear in the writings is a diverse spectrum of descriptions. This is to be expected because each person experiences compassion from a relationship stance built upon a history of compassion experiences. Exposure to a broad

range of views only furthers our understanding of how people perceive the compassion space. Exposure to this broad spectrum helps us all to promote a culture of compassion.

Each time we meet a person it is an opportunity to enter the compassion space. This sounds simple, but it is not easy to maintain as a frame for living. If we could see each encounter as a compassion opportunity then we may also be able to see each encounter as an opportunity to understand why a compassionate space did not form. This is particularly important when we meet the compassion gifted, or compassion radiant people. We need to ask, “What is it that we learn from sitting with them?”

Developing open discourse about compassion is important. It seems that the word compassion is often used but a dialog about why it is being used (like in a mission statement), what it means to the people, and how it is translated into practice, is seldom explored in any depth. This compassion discourse could take place anywhere the word is used. The results of such a discourse could be put into a document and made available to the public. In addition once the document is done it is not done! It is possible that not only can individuals develop their compassion over time, but so can organizations. This would mean that the document should change over time. Both the dialog and the document should remain open for feedback and change. This is why documents on this website are frequently dated so that updates can be made. This is a part of passing on new insights as they happen.

Passing it on! This simple act is critical for the development of compassion. We can pass on our knowledge. We can pass on knowledge that others have shared. We share the compassion space with others and we can be witness to this happening. This sharing of the compassion space through witnessing is the one way that people get to experience levels of compassion beyond their current understanding. It is very difficult to expand one’s understanding of compassion, to develop compassion to higher levels, without having first hand compassion experiences at those levels. It is like traveling into an unknown land with no map, no guide and no knowledge of the terrain. Through passing it on we give people the opportunity to get a map for develop their compassion to deeper levels. We also give them the possibility of passing it on to others.

The Conclusion

CompassionSpace.com is designed to be a central internet portal for information on empathy and compassion. Also any visitor can send information to be reviewed, and then added, simply by clicking on the email button. If someone doesn’t wish to share their email address then they can use the community button to share comments and information. Can we move toward a culture of compassion? We can if we share knowledge. We can if we open the discourse within academia, the work place and the home. Compassion is something that can be developed and we can all develop compassion a bit further than where we are currently. This is why passing it on is important. This is a responsibility of every person who seeks to leave the world just slightly better than it was during their life time.