

The Power of Compassion.

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Imagine a perfectly compassionate world. How would others treat you? How would you treat them? How would you feel? How would you live? How would this perfectly compassionate world affect how you live the minutiae of your daily life?

The likelihood is that you are imagining a world that is quite different from the one you currently live in, perhaps highlighting the lack of compassion in our lives and in the world. But it might also help you to access your own compassion and to glimpse what you can become, as you imagine soothing sensations of warmth, acceptance, friendliness and belonging. If you are suffering deeply as you read this, you may imagine that compassion could not possibly be sufficient to address your pain. But science is demonstrating that compassion is surprisingly successful at ameliorating all kinds of psychological distress and at preventing unnecessary suffering. Just thinking kind and compassionate thoughts towards ourselves and others has been shown to have significant effects on our brains, emotions, physical states and behaviours. This gentle, healing practice not only alleviates suffering but also increases positive emotions, improving overall life satisfaction (Frederickson et al, 2008; Gilbert, 2009).

What is compassion?

What comes to mind when you consider the word ‘compassion’? Many people fear that compassion is self-indulgent weakness or that it will leave them vulnerable in a harsh world. Yet, when you think of people you know to be very compassionate, its true meaning becomes clear. The most compassionate people are tolerant, highly conscious and aware, unafraid to think critically or to question the social, economic and cultural norms of the dominant culture. They are not afraid to step outside the norm and put in the extra effort that compassionate living requires. When you call to mind the most compassionate people, they are not weak or lazy or out of control. Nor are they drained by their compassion; rather they seem to be sustained by it. Compassion demands the courage to face the suffering of life and develop the tools to counter it effectively. It builds resourcefulness so that we can be more fearless in our journey through life, knowing that we have useful, practical skills to draw on when needed.

The word “compassion” comes from the Latin word *compati* which means “to suffer with”. The Dalai Lama defines compassion as “sensitivity to the suffering of self and others, with a deep commitment to try to relieve it.” So compassion involves focussed attention and awareness, sensitivity and openness to pain and the motivation to act to relieve that pain. It is a multifaceted combination of emotion, cognition, motivation and behaviour. It involves both caring and doing: kindness combined with appropriate action (Pauley and McPherson, 2010). In the words of the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, “compassion is a verb”.

A growing body of evidence suggests that we are motivated to come to the aid of others in distress by an innate instinct for compassion, even when doing so costs the self. We seem to be ‘hardwired’ to care and connect (Doty, 2012). Studies demonstrate this instinct in children as young as eighteen months. Species is not a barrier to compassionate action; similar traits

are found in other primates and in rodents, ants, bats, whales, dolphins, elephants and farmed animals including chickens and geese. Compassion, co-operation and altruism are adaptive traits that protect individual members of a group and help to ensure survival.

Darwin suggested as much in *The Descent of Man*, published eleven years before his death in which he devoted a chapter to the origin of what he termed 'sympathy' but what is today referred to as empathy, altruism or compassion:

“...In however complex a manner this feeling may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend one another, it will have been increased through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.” (Darwin, 2004, p.130)

Studies show that the parts of the brain that are activated when mothers look at their own babies compassionately are also activated when we contemplate harm being done to others, when we help others and when we experience positive emotions. Feeling and acting compassionately seem to trigger the same areas of the brain that are triggered when we feel good. Quite simply, compassion makes us feel good.

Compassion is not just an innate instinct: it is also a skill that we can learn and practice (Weng et al., 2013). If you wanted to improve the wellbeing or fitness of your physical body you might adopt a fitness regime and practice it regularly. In the same way, we can improve the health of our minds by practicing compassion.

It is important to be sensitive to the potential for fear of compassion that may have its roots in negative early life events (Rockliff et al., 2008). Fear of compassion is not restricted to fear of self-indulgence; many people find it difficult to be compassionate towards others or to receive compassion from others. If you find that the suggestions for compassion-focused thinking and behaviour in this chapter increase your anxiety rather than soothe you, you may wish to consider therapeutic intervention.

The subject of compassion is found in all religions, yet it is not bound to them. It is interwoven into many ethical frameworks and moral philosophies. It is of interest not only to psychologists, but also to animal ethologists, social activists, teachers, parents, anthropologists, economists, biologists, neurologists, geneticists and historians. It is a universally relevant topic.

The Need for Compassion

Western science is becoming increasingly interested in subjects like compassion and mindful attention. Why? The answer is simple: compassion is good for us. Practicing compassion has a positive effect that is noticeable in biological indicators of stress and immune function. It makes us calmer, decreases our heart rate and increases positive emotions and social connection. In therapeutic contexts, it has been shown to be effective for a wide range of psychological symptoms including depression (Gilbert et al., 2006), obsessive compulsive behavior, anxiety (Pauley and McPherson, 2010), traumatic stress, eating disorders (Goss and Allen, 2012), personality difficulties (Mayhew and Gilbert, 2008) and for people who experience what is sometimes termed psychosis (Birchwood et al., 2007).

The science of compassion is often referred to as transdiagnostic and non-pathologising. Compassion is necessary because life is difficult. Every sentient being shares a common goal: avoidance of pain and suffering and attainment of peace and contentment. Yet everyone suffers. From the moment of birth we have obstacles to overcome in order to survive. Everyone makes mistakes. Experiences of disappointment, loss, sadness, grief, anger and fear are universal. Few of us go through life without losing those we love. Everyone risks suffering from serious injury and illness and everyone faces the prospect of death.

Social inequality and discontent is fostered by the fact that we are increasingly conditioned to prioritise extrinsic values, such as appearance, popularity and material wealth, above intrinsic values (personal growth, social affiliation). We are encouraged to believe that there are not enough resources in life for everyone and rather than share what is available, we must strive to take what we can for ourselves. We are taught that if we work hard enough and are successful enough then happiness, popularity, attraction and social acceptance can be bought. Yet, when we examine those who are successful by Western standards, or when we ourselves manage to secure the item that we imagined would make us happy, we find that happiness does not lie in these promised paths at all. People who are at peace and who experience contentment, happiness and wellbeing, practice compassion; material wealth and success as it is popularly defined, are not necessary ingredients. Just simplifying our lives, even in minor ways, can be an act of compassion.

The scientific study of compassion in the last few decades has been largely the domain of neuroscientists and psychologists, with increasing interest from animal ethologists and ecopsychologists. Some of the first studies involved using electroencephalography (EEG) to study the brains of Tibetan monks known to be ‘expert’ in compassion. When the monks saw the EEG electrode cap that the researchers were using, they laughed - not because the caps were funny, but, as one monk explained “Everyone knows that compassion isn’t in the head. It’s in the heart” (Doty, 2012). Research demonstrates that compassion is the interconnection between head and heart and it also lies at the intersection of evolution, where the individual meets the universal.

Psychological Effects of Compassion

Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) and Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT) are “depathologising” approaches to working with psychological suffering. In other words, rather than situate suffering at the level of the individual where it is regarded as abnormal or an illness, suffering is seen as a patterned response or process that is caused and maintained by difficult life events and our habitual ways of responding to them. Psychological difficulties are therefore viewed as courageous, if misguided, attempts to survive in a world that often lacks compassion, in which challenging life circumstances can cause immense suffering. CFT offers the opportunity to learn new, more adaptive ways of coping.

The increasingly fragmented nature of modern society, with more mobility and less social contact within communities, has led to greater personal freedom but also more loneliness and isolation. While loneliness has a negative effect on health by depressing the immune system, the deliberate exercising of compassion reduces those effects and has several positive effects (Diener and Seligman, 2006). People who practice mindfulness and compassion meditation are five times more likely to help someone in pain (Condon et al., 2013). Practicing self-

compassion is associated with greater motivation to make amends for a moral transgression and greater motivation to change a perceived weakness (Breines and Chen, 2012).

Compassionate social engagement is a predictor of longer life and faster recovery from disease, higher levels of happiness and well-being and a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life (Doty, 2012). The practice of loving kindness meditation is associated with increases in social support and life satisfaction and decreased symptoms of illness and depression (Frederickson et al., 2008). People who are self-compassionate are less likely to catastrophise negative situations, experience anxiety following a stressor and avoid challenging tasks for fear of failure (Allen and Leary, 2010). Longitudinal studies demonstrate that "strengths of the heart - zest, gratitude, hope and love - are more robustly associated with life satisfaction than more cerebral strengths such as love of learning and creativity" (Park and Peterson, 2006).

The Evolution of Compassion

We have inherited what it means to be human by a process of evolution. Our genetic inheritance, combined with the environments and eras that we are born into, make us who we are. If you had been born at a different time, in different circumstances, you would be a very different person to the one you are today. Psychologist and author Paul Gilbert, the founder of Compassion Focussed Therapy, invites us to imagine how different he would have been if he had been abducted at two weeks of age by a violent drug gang. The same person is highly unlikely to have grown to dedicate his career to the scientific study of compassion and the relief of global suffering. Instead, he would very likely be engaged in the same criminal, violent life he was immersed in as an infant.

The cultivation of compassion at both individual and environmental levels is one of the most imperative and important tasks of humanity. In a memorable scene from the film *Elephant Man*, John Hurt, playing David Merrick cries out:

“I am not an elephant. I am not an animal. I am a human being.”

It is a deeply moving piece of acting but closer examination reveals the statement to be quite inaccurate. It reflects the prevailing but erroneous view of evolution as a linear process, the pinnacle and end point of which is homo sapiens, a species that is separate from, and somehow superior to, the rest of the natural world. Evolution is more of a branched process that can be visually represented as a tree with an ancient trunk from which the first cellular life forms began 3.6 billion years ago, with many branches which in turn branch off and are attached to twigs and leaves. Different species are represented by those leaves. Humans are not the pinnacle of evolution; we are just one of those leaves.

It is highly probable that compassion originates in the first affiliative, caring interactions that occur between mothers and their offspring after birth. Although most of the literature refers to this within the evolutionary context of the mammalian caregiving system, evidence from animal ethology and animal behaviour documents similar traits in other vertebrates. Darwin has referred to the maternal instinct as the strongest of all instincts. The strength of this bond ensures proximity between mothers and their children, thus ensuring the survival of dependent newborns. This bond also involves tactile and auditory soothing and the use of facial expressions. It is unsurprising, therefore, that one of our first instincts when comforting

another is to speak in a soothing voice, to use comforting forms of touch such as hugging and to make use of compassionate, encouraging facial expressions. It is within this bond that we learn so much about the social and relational context in which distress is signalled and alleviated and in which we can be soothed and nurtured.

Emotion and the Brain

It is customary for us to experience a range of feelings and emotions, not all of them pleasant. In fact, even the pleasant ones can become unpleasant when they are not regulated or balanced. Our brains have evolved at least three types of emotional regulation system. Each has distinct features and functions and they work together, balancing and counterbalancing each other. What we experience as emotion is actually patterns of action in our brain involving millions of brain cells. If you were examined using a Functional MRI scanner whilst feeling anxious, a particular pattern of your brain would be seen to light up. If, however, you were given a task that made you feel peaceful, safe and contented, a different pattern in your brain would be seen to become activated. The more often you activate a pattern the deeper it becomes embedded in your make-up, rather like a river that begins as a stream and becomes deeper, wider and stronger as it grows. This is sometimes referred to as 'neurons that fire together, wire together'. Of course, our psychological makeup is a little more complex than this but thinking in terms of three systems provides a useful understanding of some of the emotions that we find difficult and of how some of our reactions have become unthinking, automatic and reflexive.

The Three Emotion Regulation Systems

1. The Threat and Self Protection System

The function of this system is to be alert for threats and to respond very quickly with surges of emotion. These emotions alert us physiologically to take action to protect ourselves. This can involve action or the inhibition of action – we might run away (flight), we might fight or we could freeze. This system affects us just as powerfully if we perceive threats to be directed towards ourselves or towards those we care about - what sociologists and psychologists refer to as our 'in-group'. Although this system gives rise to some of the more difficult emotions such as disgust, fear and anger, it has evolved very well to protect us. Without this system we would not be here. If, when we are crossing a road a car comes suddenly speeding towards us, it is our threat and self-protection system that saves us, propelling our body with surges of physiological reactions that enable us to make a very rapid decision to run as fast as possible out of its way.

When we examine how vital to our survival this emotional regulation system is, we can better understand why our brains give more priority to threats than they do to pleasurable experiences. That is how we have evolved. Many psychological problems have their origins in this system and many people presenting for psychotherapy not only feel threatened by factors in their external environment (real threats or feared threats) - they are also under constant threat from an internal critic. This may have its origins in an intimidating, unsupportive home environment, resulting in a highly sensitised threat and self-protective system that causes unnecessary anxiety in day-to-day life (Gilbert, 2009b). The over-emphasis on reports of crime and negative news in the media can also lead to unwarranted low-level anxiety and fear (Romer et al., 2003).

2. The Incentive and Resource-Seeking System

We need to be motivated to seek the resources we require in order to survive. From the moment we get up in the morning until the moment we lie down at night, we are acting on our motivation to obtain what we need to live. The function of this system is to give us positive feelings that guide and encourage us to seek out resources that are necessary to survive and thrive: food, shelter, friends, partners, comfort, affection and social engagement. We are also motivated to find resources for those we care about: our family, friends and other members of our in-group. This is what incentivises us to work to earn a living and to provide for ourselves.

This system can tolerate peaks of emotion such as the sense of achievement at passing an exam or the intense pleasure of making a commitment to someone with whom we have a close, loving relationship. However, it can be stretched uncomfortably beyond its limits with intense excitement. This happens some children at Christmas when, after weeks (or even months) of anticipation, they receive so many presents that they become over-excited and energised and race from one toy to another. The day frequently ends in tears as they cannot cope with the overstimulation. Winning the lottery might lead you to feel the same, as the excitement and thoughts of how you would use this fortune caused an imbalance in this system. You might expect to be overjoyed but in reality you would probably feel constantly overstimulated, experiencing racing thoughts and sleepless nights.

The pleasurable aspects of the incentive and resource seeking system include feeling energised, motivated, competent and in control of life as we work towards attaining what we desire. Some people seek to artificially stimulate this system by obtaining 'highs' through drug taking, or engaging in pleasurable activities to excess such as sex, alcohol or food. Without restraint and balance, these activities lose their pleasure and actually cause distress. On the other hand, a lack of stimulation of the incentive and resource seeking system would leave us feeling unmotivated, unable to experience pleasure in the things that are usually pleasurable. Severe under-stimulation of the incentive and resource seeking system would leave us unable to motivate ourselves to get out of bed, eat, meet our friends, engage with our loved ones or our work, or carry out the basic tasks of washing, shopping, cooking and eating. It is this under-stimulation that is characteristic of depression (Treadway et al., 2012).

In the developed Western world, we live in a state of chronic over-stimulation of the incentive/resource seeking system (Pani, 2000). We are constantly exposed to advertising and promotion of things that are not necessary for our survival or even for us to be happy and to thrive. In our stratified and achievement-driven society, we are measured by evidence of accumulated wealth rather than by who we are. We are strongly motivated by a desire to be successful in ways that are socially determined and the need to be valued by our peer group generates 'status anxiety' (de Botton, 2004). This is an understandable survival strategy when one considers that we evolved in small groups and to be ostracised from the group meant certain death. But in modern society, in order to secure the possessions we feel we need to be respected by others, we work increasingly long hours, often in jobs that are unsatisfying and incongruent with our deepest values and ethics in life. The hours in our lives are precious. We owe it to ourselves to spend them wisely.

3. The Soothing and Contentment System

The predominance of the first two systems in our Western culture means that the third, the soothing and contentment system, is often ignored and undervalued. This system enables feelings of peace, warmth, contentment, equanimity and soothing. It restores balance. When we are not defending against threats and when we do not need to achieve anything because we have enough, we experience contentment. This brings feelings of satiety, security and safeness. It is easy to see why it is thought to have originated in the close attachment between mothers and their offspring (Bowlby, 1969). This inner peace is quite different from the excitement of the “striving and succeeding” feeling of the incentive/resource seeking system. It is also different from feelings of emptiness and boredom. When people practice meditation and mindfully slowing down, they report these feelings of inner calm, contentment and connection to others.

This system is highly relevant to compassion because it is linked to affiliation, affection and kindness. It develops in infancy when our distress at our needs for warmth, stimulation, cleanliness or food causes us to signal to our caregivers. When they meet our needs, we feel soothed and calmed. Our need for soothing continues throughout life and is what motivates us to engage socially, particularly in intimate, close relationships. When we have a problem or a difficult day, most of us want to enter an intimate space with others where we can confide, feel understood, accepted and comforted. Feelings of soothing and safeness appear to work through brain networks similar to those that produce peaceful feelings of fulfilment and contentment (Gilbert, 2009).

The Interaction of the Systems

As is the case with every other animal, our drive to survive is powerfully written into our makeup. Many of the emotions that we find difficult such as anxiety, anger, sadness and disgust are essential for our survival. We didn't ask to be born with brains that function in this way; we didn't ask to be born into a society that constructs us as it does. The good news is that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with us when we have negative emotions and that we can take responsibility for how we are. We can learn how to accept or tolerate these feelings and minimise their negative impact on our lives and on the lives of others. We can develop the skills of self-soothing and of nurturing positive emotions like gratitude, serenity, acceptance and compassion for self and others. We experience distress when our incentive/resource seeking and our threat/self-protection systems are out of balance with our soothing/contentment system. Our distress is calmed when our emotions are regulated by activating the soothing/contentment system. Learning to focus on kindness to self and others can stimulate this system. This is the work of compassion training. For those who choose to address these issues with a counsellor, Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT) provides an option to undertake this work in a supportive and professional environment. The development of self-compassion can, however, be practiced by anyone in their daily lives.

Working Therapeutically with Compassion

Compassionate Mind Training

Compassion cannot eliminate suffering. Rather it is a way of engaging and working with suffering that soothes us and gives us the courage and emotional stability necessary to be with suffering, rather than run from it. So much of our suffering arises not from the challenges of life themselves, but from our emotional reaction to those challenges, how we rail against the unfairness of them and ruminate over them. Compassion can eliminate this

kind of unnecessary suffering by fostering a sense of acceptance that gently moves us through life rather than staying stuck at its difficult parts.

Our thoughts affect our physical and our emotional selves. If we feel hungry and fantasise about food, our bodies react physiologically. We salivate in the same way that we would if we were actually in the presence of food. Our imaginations are very powerful. Unfortunately, when we worry or ruminate our bodies also react physiologically. Our body does not realise that we are not in the heat of the situation and our heart races, our palms sweat and adrenalin and other hormones surge through our bodies preparing us for fight or flight; all because we are imagining what it will be like if we fail an exam, or if we ruminate over a mistake we made at work earlier that day. Compassionate mind training takes advantage of this power of the mind to imagine soothing, calming scenarios and to focus on loving, warm, kind, compassionate thoughts and feelings towards ourselves and others. This is effective because our brain systems do not operate simultaneously: it is impossible to feel threatened and calm, or to feel driven and contented at the same time.

Some of the tools used in compassionate mind training include meditation such as mindfulness and loving kindness meditation, the use of compassionate imagery, awareness training such as keeping a thoughts diary and even tools borrowed from method acting in which we deliberately adopt a compassionate role and act compassionately until it becomes more habitual and feels more natural (Gilbert, 2010). It is useful to remember that the science of compassion applies equally to people who wish to live a more meaningful, resilient and ethical life, as well as for people who suffer in ways that can be helped by therapeutic intervention. For every person who decides to seek psychotherapeutic help, there are many, many more who experience their emotions as problematic or difficult to tolerate and manage but do not seek formal intervention.

Compassion Focussed Therapy

Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT) has largely emerged from the clinical work of Professor Paul Gilbert at the University of Derby. He found that people who had high levels of shame and self-criticism tended to respond poorly to therapeutic intervention, particularly to interventions using more traditional cognitive behavioural methods (Gilbert, 2009b). In particular, clients in therapy reported that although they could make sense of alternative ways of thinking and behaving (e.g. 'I know the abuse I experienced was not my fault'), they could not feel it on an emotional level (e.g. 'I still feel I was to blame' or 'I still feel ashamed'). Gilbert found that a specific focus on developing compassion within the therapeutic relationship and facilitating self-compassion was an essential ingredient in countering self-sabotaging ways of living. CFT is not a separate school of therapy; it is an approach that informs and enriches other therapeutic models and theories.

Compassion-focussed therapy teaches clients that, because of how our brains have evolved, anxiety, anger and depression are natural experiences which are 'not our fault'. Clients are helped to explore how early experiences (e.g. neglect, abuse or other threatening experiences) may relate to ongoing fears (e.g. rejection, abuse), safety strategies (e.g. social avoidance or submissive behaviour) and unintended consequences such as social rejection or other mental health problems. When people feel threatened and self-critical with strong bodily feelings, they can learn to slow their breathing and refocus attention on imagining a compassionate place, becoming a compassionate person and/or imagining someone compassionate talking to them.

(Gilbert, 2013)

CFT encourages clients to develop the skills of self-soothing that are crucial to counteracting negative self-judgements that impair mood, self-regard and quality of life. Clients are taught to become aware and accepting of their own needs and feelings, developing a kind, warm and forgiving attitude towards themselves and others. Feeling compassionate is an innate quality that can be cultivated and nurtured with practice, giving us a skill that provides refuge against our own self-criticism, bringing relief from any sense of failure or inadequacy.

Self Compassion

Although the idea of developing compassion for self and others is a mainstay of many Eastern philosophies, practiced daily by millions of people for thousands of years, the term “self-compassion” appeared relatively recently in Western psychological literature (Neff, 2003). Kristin Neff specialises in the study of fostering self-compassion which she defines as:

“being touched by and open to one’s own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one’s suffering and heal oneself with kindness. Self-compassion also involves offering non-judgemental understanding to one’s pain, inadequacies and failures, so that one’s experience is seen as part of the larger, human experience.”

(Neff, 2003, p.87)

Neff has identified three core components of self-compassion: self-kindness, recognising our common humanity and being mindful. We will examine each of these elements in detail.

1. Self-Kindness

We are much more likely to try to be stoic in the face of our pain, than to be gentle and kind towards ourselves. A parent’s instinct, in a secure attachment with a child, is to comfort and ease the pain of life’s mishaps. Children who are securely attached in this way are able to receive their parent’s salve and have the courage to venture forth to play or explore, knowing that there is a secure base to return to (Bowlby, 1988). We know that the kindly reassurance and gentle comfort that is helpful to a child who has made a mistake or is struggling in some other way, is also helpful to adults.

For example, if a loved one or friend confides in us that they are feeling bad because they gave a presentation at work and they were so tired trying to prepare for it amidst a family crisis that they stumbled through it and forgot most of what they wanted to say, we would be kind and understanding towards them. We would remind them of the difficult circumstances in which they tried to work, reassuring them that they were not at fault and had done their best. We would probably minimise and suggest that their listeners may not have perceived the presentation to be nearly as bad as our friend imagined they did. We would remind them that the presentation is in the past, help them recall their strengths and successes and express the hope that the next presentation will go more smoothly. We would listen empathically to our friend’s account and feelings and acknowledge our understanding of his or her predicament. We would speak to our friend in warm tones in order to soothe and maybe offer the comfort of a cup of tea, or a hug.

But if we ourselves are in this situation, what do we do? We ruminate about what we did wrong, how we could have improved and we may spend hours thinking ‘if only...’. Some of us with very high levels of shame might not want to face our workmates again, imagining that they hold the same representation of us as severely lacking, as we hold of ourselves. Some of us with harsh inner self-critics might use unhelpful, hurtful words such as ‘stupid’ or ‘idiot’, words that we wouldn’t dream of using towards another. What is it that makes us behave in a different way towards ourselves, compared with what we know to be effective and compassionate towards others? Part of the answer may lie in the harsh or critical early life environments where judgemental, sarcastic or ridiculing voices of authority we heard as children are internalised, to become our nemesis throughout life.

How we see ourselves in the minds of others is very important. We have, after all, evolved in small groups of people where the esteem in which we were held by other group members and the degree to which we were valued were crucial to our survival. When we make a mistake, especially in social contexts, the threat of rejection activates the self-protective mechanism. For many of us, that mechanism is one we inherited from our parents, teachers and from the social contexts in which we were reared. It may be a mechanism that erroneously believes that negative feedback in the form of stern, punitive criticism rectifies and prevents mistakes. In practice, however, self-criticism leads to further insecurity and lower self-confidence and can be so detrimental that we can give up and withdraw (Powers et al, 2001).

Compassionate self-kindness, in contrast, allows us to leave our mistakes in the past, accept that everyone makes mistakes and gives us the strength and resilience to try again. The next time you notice your self-critic, be aware of what he or she is saying to you and how they are saying it. Then try to awaken your inner self-compassion to generate the type of statements that you would use towards someone you really care about who has made a mistake. Notice the difference in the tone of your internal voice and in the words you use as you practice compassionate self-talk. Notice the difference in how you feel when you treat yourself kindly.

Recognising Common Humanity

“A human being is part of the whole, called by us “Universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

- Einstein, The Einstein Papers

These words are attributed to physicist Albert Einstein in a letter he wrote, in 1950, to a friend who had lost a young son to polio.

Many schools of thought, from Buddhist psychology to quantum physics, suggest that our view of ourselves as separate selves is an illusion. Of course, our physical embodiment means that we are in fact separated from each other, but we are also deeply connected with all of life. By definition, compassion is relational. When we are in touch with our common humanity, we remember that we are not alone when we suffer, when we make mistakes or poor choices, or when negative events happen in our lives. We frequently react with disappointment, anger, displeasure, or even depression when we perceive a gap between our

personal capacity and the aims of our incentive/resource seeking system. When we are thwarted or blocked in our goals and incentives our threat/self-protection system is activated. When we perceive ourselves to be the block, then the self can become the object of attack. It is in these scenarios that a compassionate mind can activate the self-soothing system that recognises the fallibility of everyone, including ourselves, calming us. We can accept that we can do no more than our best and that seeking perfection inevitably sets us up to fail.

It is always useful to remind ourselves that we did not choose to be born as we are or to live in the contexts in which we live. From this point of understanding, we can take responsibility for managing our lives in the present moment, just as we are. This reduces the tunnel vision that accompanies a focus on the self and enables us to move from feeling insecure, unworthy, insufficient, alone and isolated to feeling connected with others through our common humanity. When we view our failures and mistakes as aspects of ourselves that we have in common with others, rather than aspects of ourselves that are different from others, we can move from feeling isolated to feeling that we belong.

A sense of connectedness to others activates the self-soothing systems that originate in our earliest attachment relationships. For some people accessing this system is all that is needed in order to overcome a sense of isolation and loneliness. However, many people's earliest attachment relationships are characterised by a lack of care, unmet needs, frustration, or even violation and abuse. For those of us unfortunate enough to have these traumatic experiences so early in life, when we are at our most vulnerable, connection with others can restimulate feelings of distress, helplessness, hopelessness and a deep fear of intimacy. Compassionate Mind Training and Compassion Focussed Therapy can help by facilitating clients as they learn the skills of compassion that they missed out on in their early lives and by offering social connection in a safe, supporting and containing environment. It is never too late to be compassionate.

Realising our common humanity can also help to calm the threat we feel when our goal for a higher place on the social, professional, economic or academic hierarchy is disrupted, for example through unemployment, debt, or the disappointments in achievement that we all face. We live in a competitive, largely unsympathetic culture that constantly compares. We are judged on the basis of what we own, our abilities, successes, appearance, achievements and performances. We measure ourselves and our worth not by who we are but by where we are placed by statistical analysis in comparison to others. We all want to be placed at least in the normal cohort, but preferably as high as possible amongst the highest scorers. This is true whether we are being measured on positive personality traits, intelligence tests, in our work performance, in degree of attractiveness to others, or on socio-economic scales. Essentially we give the power of determining our self-worth to others. The sad fact is that when we are placed at the top of the scale, others with whom we have so much common humanity, and who feel much as we do, are placed lower on the scale. But as we have a tendency to distance ourselves from people whose success makes us feel bad about ourselves and also from those who are placed below us on these socially constructed scales, our success can unwittingly lead to isolation (McPherson et al., 2006).

Living compassionately enables us to have a clearer insight into our beliefs and assumptions and to adopt new values by which our lives encompass compassion for ourselves and for others. When we assess the information around us through a compassionate lens, it tends to look very different. Instead of valuing competition and one-upmanship, we can begin to aim

for co-operation, connection and mutual understanding. Compassionate values and beliefs can help us live more ethical lives, bringing peace of mind and a deeper sense of kinship.

Being Mindful

Mindfulness is a translation of the Pali word *sati*, which refers to *awareness, attention* and *remembering* (Germer, 2005). When we bring these qualities to our emotional life, we can change our relationship to suffering. Most of the time we are immersed in and carried along by our emotions, especially when they are painful. Guilt, shame, fear and anxiety can consume us, leading to rumination and depression. We can wallow in self-pity, regret and embarrassment. Mindfulness allows us to take a step back from these compelling feelings and observe them with dispassion, by identifying and naming them. They can then be seen in the context of common humanity, when we realise that these are universal feelings and we do not need to blame or hate ourselves for them. Introducing self-kindness in relation to these distressing feelings then leads to increased compassion and self-forgiveness.

Much suffering is caused, not by the original feeling but by our response to it - “I shouldn't feel like this”, “I am a weak person”, “why does this always happen to me?”, etc. By using mindfulness, we can accept and recognise our feelings as part of the human condition, while also seeing that they are constantly changing. Allowing feelings to come and go, like clouds in the sky, eases distress and helps us return to a stable core of emotional equilibrium.

The balanced awareness, clarity and non-judgemental acceptance of what is occurring in the present moment that comes with mindfulness is the foundation of compassion. Mindfulness allows us to step back from ourselves and our lives, to gain perspective and to engage in meta-awareness. We can repeatedly evoke goodwill towards ourselves, especially when we are suffering. Conscious awareness only exists in the present moment: in contrast, most of the negative emotions in our lives stem from anxiety about what we could have done differently in the past and what we will do or what will happen in the future. Our emotions give us tunnel vision, while mindfulness opens our minds to clarity.

Mindfulness is about being in touch with reality. It is about taking the space to see things exactly as they are, so that we can respond to them in the most compassionate and most effective manner. To give ourselves compassion, we must first recognise that we are suffering. We cannot address pain that we cannot feel. Mindless, emotional overwhelm on the one hand or constant low-level anxiety and depression on the other hinders our ability to handle life effectively. Mindfulness allows us to notice and acknowledge our emotions but simultaneously gives us the necessary distance from them to be aware of the workings of our mind. This allows us to begin to act with more wisdom, compassion and gentleness towards ourselves and others.

Case Study

Jane first came to therapy two months after giving birth to twin girls. She stated that her husband, Jack's, forgetfulness was really getting her down. She frequently mentioned that he would forget to buy some items on the shopping list, or forget that they were due to have visitors. When Jane was asked to focus on her emotional reactions to her husband's actions, she was lost for words to accurately label them. The therapeutic work involving the use of a list of words to describe feelings (CNVC, 2005), enabled her to non-judgementally recognise and name her emotions. She was also able to identify the physiological reactions in her body that accompanied those emotions and to see how they emanated from her thoughts.

‘I began to shout at him that he couldn’t possibly have forgotten to buy bread. I could feel my stomach tightening and my jaw clenching. Then it suddenly occurred to me that he had forgotten the bread last week too and I stamped out to the washroom thinking how useless he is when I saw the washing machine that he had failed to fix as promised and the large bundle of dirty baby clothes that I would now have to wash by hand. I suddenly felt like crying and I thought that if he really loved me and the girls he would not forget to do these things that are so important for us at the moment. My heart felt as if it was sinking and I felt hopeless and helpless and really depressed.’

Using a list of words that describe our needs (CNVC, 2005b) enabled Jane to adopt a compassionate awareness of why her family life had become so unsatisfactory to her:

‘When I read through the list of words describing feelings and needs it occurred to me that I was looking to Jack for support and co-operation and when he failed to meet those needs I reacted emotionally by feeling irritated. Yet beneath the irritation I was very scared of what I had to cope with alone. I was afraid that I would become so angry that I would slam doors or throw something and frighten the girls. I was also afraid that I would be so tired that I would fall asleep and something bad would happen to them. I was afraid that some morning I would be so exhausted that I would not be able to get out of bed and care for them.

I knew that it was important for me to talk to someone who would understand how I felt so I telephoned my mother and we talked about what life was like for her when my brothers, who are twins, were born when I was only a year old. She reassured me that she and my father struggled to cope when we were very young but they managed in the end. It was my mother who suggested that we do our shopping online to relieve some of the pressure on us.

After I had spoken to her I began to soften towards Jack and wonder if he was feeling as overwhelmed as I was about the changes in our life since the twins' birth. When I asked him the next day, he told me that he was feeling exhausted and that he was afraid that his forgetfulness was affecting his work. We made plans to ask our friends and family for more help and to have a night out together, just the two of us, once a fortnight. I feel I have an ally in him now and I don’t feel as irritated or apprehensive about caring for the twins as I was when I first started therapy.’

Compassion: Where the Individual meets the Universal

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of compassion is the notion that we are not separate from others. We are deeply interconnected and we are united in having a common goal: to avoid pain and suffering and to attain peace, contentment and wellbeing. This is true of me and of you. It is true of the people close to us and those we do not know. It is true of those we greatly admire and those we dislike. It is true of every sentient animal on the planet. When we realise this, we can begin to view each other through the lens of what we have in common rather than through the lens of difference and separateness. It is the notion of difference and separateness from the rest of life that suppresses compassion and enables cruelty and indifference to foster (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

A compassionate life is predicated upon clear insight. It requires courage to look at the world in which we live and see beyond the glitter to the suffering beneath. Every being on earth makes a difference to others. We can choose to live in such a way that when we leave this life we will have left the world a more compassionate, better place than it was when we entered it; or we can leave this life with a trail of hurt and harm behind us, not because we were cruel, but because we were unthinking, mindless and without compassion. While socio-cultural norms and conditions can foster and spread prejudice, lack of compassion, hatred, exploitation and war from one generation to another, social connection can do the opposite. These are the areas in which compassion can, literally, change the world and dramatically affect the outcome of our evolution.

Neuroscientific studies on race show that the reaction of the amygdala, which is vigilance-related and associated with the threat/self-protection system, varies by individual, depending on how prejudicial they are against race. For instance, the more prejudiced their attitudes, the greater the activity of the amygdala when looking at pictures of people of different race which is regarded as an out-group. This has been found when the participants were themselves white and viewed photos of black people. However, when the research participants were asked to view photos of people of different racial origin and simultaneously answer questions designed so that the person in the photo is viewed as an individual with uniqueness and preferences of their own (e.g. what kind of vegetable the person would like to eat), there is no difference in amygdala reaction between photos of black or white faces (Wheeler and Fiske, 2005).

Other studies show that while some individuals are regarded as less than human by virtue of the fact that they are unfortunate enough to have become mentally ill, addicted or homeless, people stop dehumanising them in experiments when asked to guess what these people would like to eat if they were serving them in a soup kitchen (Harris and Fiske, 2006). Personal connections decrease prejudice, help us to recognise the person in the other individual, and increase compassion and understanding. Living a life that is congruent with ethical values entails both self-compassion and compassion to others. It is the way to peace of mind. It could be our evolutionary path: the road we take depends on the choices we make as individuals.

Compassion for Others

The humanitarian photographer, Lisa Kristine was so moved by the oppressed and enslaved people she encountered around the world that she has devoted her work as a photographer to compassionate living, creating awareness of their plight. It is difficult to imagine the individuals behind the statistics of slavery. Although human slavery is illegal, at the time of writing there are 29.8 million humans enslaved in the world, which is more than at any other time in human history. Her work is compassion in action and an appropriate example of our purpose in life and the power of each individual one of us to make a difference.

‘...I was appalled. If this could exist and people could be treated with such a lack of equality and were forced to do things that were so horrific and difficult. And that they did so under coercion and violence and they had no choice to walk away, then I would be the torch bearer, and I would be the witness, and I would show the world that this is happening.... Photographs, since they are visual, transcend language. The viewer has time to pause in front of someone who appears very different than themselves, and perhaps if they were passing them somewhere in the world on the street wouldn’t

really look at them because that might be imposing or frightening. You know, it's in that pause that the relationship can be born and then the connection and then the idea to raise up and say 'How can I help you? Because you are me.' (Kristine, 2014).

One of the cornerstones of compassionate mind training is exemplified in Loving Kindness Meditation. It is predicated on the desire we share with all sentient beings to avoid suffering and be well. Yet, few of us apply its lessons to our daily lives. If it is difficult to imagine the individuals represented by statistics on human slavery, it is even more difficult to imagine each sentient individual of the 140 billion animals who are harmed and killed, every year, to feed some of the world's 7 billion humans. This figure does not include the trillions of fishes who are only valued by their weight, or the countless individuals who suffer and die for our clothing, entertainment and in research. Although most of us regard ourselves as animal lovers who do not condone acts that cause them to suffer, we live in ways that cause them significant harm. This paradox causes a state known as cognitive dissonance, causing us to live according to speciesist myth rather than fact (Bastian, 2011). It is far from conducive to our psychological wellbeing. The problem for other animals is that they are our legal property, just as human slaves used to be the legal property of other humans. The non-violent philosophy of ethical veganism is predicated upon the right of other animals not to be our property. Therefore it seeks to abolish our use of them. Simply eliminating from our lives the products and practices that are predicated on the suffering and exploitation of others is a powerful moral and political act that demonstrates the power of each individual to effect compassionate and just change in the world.

The most grievous suffering on the planet, quantitatively and qualitatively, is caused by our consumption of animal foods. There are compassionate, plant based alternatives for every nutrient necessary for human health and wellbeing. The major world dietetics associations all concur that a wholefoods, plant based diet without any animal foods is healthy for all stages of life, and reduces the risk of common western diseases such as hypertension, osteoporosis, obesity and many cancers. This diet has a remarkable capacity to reverse heart disease and diabetes while being very acceptable to people in terms of taste and effort (Trapp and Levin, 2012) and it also contributes to our psychological wellbeing. Increased consumption of plant foods such as fruit and vegetables helps us feel calmer, happier and more energetic (White et al, 2013). Happiness and mental health rise in an approximately dose-response way with the number of daily portions of fruit and vegetables (Blanchflower et al, 2012). Increased consumption of plant foods also appears to be associated with a deeper level of eudaimonic wellbeing such as feeling engaged, and living a meaningful, purposeful life (Conner et al, 2014). People who eliminate animal products from their lives for ethical reasons also have a more empathic response to both other humans and other animals (Filippi, 2010).

There are further, intersectional reasons why veganism is known as the ultimate compassionate ethic that simultaneously addresses some of the most significant suffering in the world (Moran, 1985; Nibert, 2002, 2013). The planet has the capacity to feed several billion more humans on plant foods than it can currently sustain on animal foods, thereby eliminating one of the most significant causes of world hunger. As animal agriculture is one of the most significant contributors to environmental destruction and climate change, veganism offers us the opportunity to allow the earth to heal and climate change to reverse. A vegan lifestyle also avoids exploiting those who work in the horrific conditions created by human consumption of animal products (MacNair, 2002).

We are enabled to exploit other animals because we are born, through no fault of our own, into speciesist societies that discriminate against them on the basis of their membership of a species other than our own, regardless of the evidence on their sentient capacity to suffer and their desire for liberty and autonomy. We have plentiful opportunities to develop compassionate awareness of the suffering that our lifestyles inflict on them. Every time we eat or purchase goods we have a choice: to inflict unnecessary harm and death on another sentient being or to be compassionate and just. The little inconvenience it costs us to be vegan means everything to them. It is the most compassionate thing we can do for ourselves and for others.

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