

Eastern Health

Let's start an epidemic!

Give away your kindness

Yvonne Russer,RN BA Nursing,Dip HE Mental Health

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**“If you want others to be happy practice compassion
If you want to be happy practice compassion” – Dalai Lama**

We are well aware of the benefits of optimising our health and how we can strive to become more resilient when we are confronted with stressful and everyday life events. We are continually exploring how medicine holds the power to cure and how to experience better health using a less medicinal approach, to reach optimum wellbeing.

What we may not notice or even overlook, is that we can improve health and longevity, achieve a superior work performance, have more supportive social relationships and so much more. We can heal quicker, reduce pain, inflammation and anxiety and recover faster. Scientific literature has shown we are capable of reducing post-operative pain, improving the survival rate of cancer patients, lowering the mortality rate in high risk cardiac patients and boosting the immune system (18)

What is this mysterious and miraculous substance? – Simply put compassion and compassionate healthcare providers (HCPs).

We should be developing our compassion as a “gift” **everyone** can use!

Compassion is not a single utterance but made up of presence and engagement which gradually spreads over onto an entire conversation (16). It is the core of the therapeutic alliance and central to all elements of patient care delivery. The HCP is part of the healing process and it's this relationship that helps to heal (1). According to psychologist Carl Rogers the main ingredients for a positive HCP-patient relationship should include empathy, honesty

and genuineness (9). Theologian Rollo May applies what is also essential to this relationship, is an emotion of regard and affection, like the motto of the Royal College of General Practitioners “Cum Scientia Caritas” (compassion with knowledge) (5). Compassion is a virtuous response that addresses the needs of another through understanding and action (4) It influences the experience of care and should always be regarded as a priority area of improvement in all health care settings. It is the hallmark of quality care and yet the core elements of compassionate care remain poorly understood (3). There is more to it than a “cup of kindness” it’s an attitude to care, its being close to patients and seeing their situation more than routine procedures, impels people not only to acknowledge but to act and most importantly its part of being human and an integral part of dignity. It’s a motivation not just a feeling.

Compassion can be seen as one of the core human values important in society and the foundation of social relationships (11) but it goes beyond this and can be defined as a deep and personal emotion, by having the ability to understand the emotional state of another person. It is a much stronger feeling which urges one person to do something to alleviate the suffering of another (19). Having compassion leads a person to show kindness, but not everyone can show compassion. Why is this?

Sharing of suffering can at times be difficult and be especially challenging for persons working in helping professions. In order to prevent an excessive sharing of suffering that may turn into distress, one may respond to the suffering of others with compassion.

In contrast to empathy, compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of

warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other's wellbeing (14).

Compassion is feeling *for* and not feeling *with* the other (9).

Biologically, empathy can be explained by “mirror neurons”. These are a type of brain cell discovered in the 90's by researchers who found neurons in the brains of monkeys that fired not only when the monkeys grabbed an object, but also when the monkeys watched another grab the same object (20). Mirror neurons also exist in areas of the brain which are in charge of emotions.

What this means is that we are able to recognise emotions of others simply by observing them. Mirror neurons are activated when we observe someone and allow us to feel, in part, the emotions that the person we are observing is feeling (17) This provides the neurophysiological grounds for empathy. So why bother?

Compassion makes people more resilient to stress and strengthens the immune response. Compassionate people are more likely to be socially connected making them less vulnerable to the effects of loneliness. Compassion can improve our lives in many ways and has shown to boost positive effects of our vagus nerve (“the nerve of compassion”) (15). When activated, it is likely to produce a feeling of a warm rising in the chest—for example, when we are moved by someone's kindness or when we appreciate a beautiful piece of music (6).

The vagus nerve is a bundle of nerves that originates in the top of the spinal cord. It activates different organs throughout the body such as the heart, lungs, liver and digestive organs (9). Research suggests that activation of the vagus nerve is associated with feelings of

caretaking and the ethical intuition, that humans from different social groups (even adversarial ones) share a common humanity (15).

In health care settings studies have suggested that HCPs who approach patients with compassion have a significantly greater effect on delivering positive and improved health outcomes. This matters to patients and shows interest in their well-being and is a positive way of expressing concern. Research has shown that patients adherence to recommendations made by HCPs increases when care is delivered in a compassionate way (3). HCPs tend to feel more engaged and valued when working within this type of environment and patients report they feel “cared for” which is crucial to better health outcomes and the well-being of teams.

We are not born with compassion and it is a skill that can be strengthened by specific exercises and with practice. Through this we can understand how to increase feelings of connection and feelings of compassion within ourselves. We can easily begin to introduce more compassion into our daily lives and transfer this into our working environment.

Interestingly, the capacity to feel for another person is not only a property of a person or a situation, but can also be influenced by training (11). Simple changes can make a difference

1. Find similarities – seeing yourself as similar to others increases feelings of compassion. Tapping your fingers to the same rhythm of a stranger increases compassionate behaviour.

2. Encourage cooperation over competition – describe a game as a “community game” increases player’s level of cooperation and sharing behaviour while the “wall street game” tends to make players more ruthless and less honest

3. **Believe in your power to do good** – when we believe we are able to make a difference we are less likely to suppress our feelings of compassion
4. **Notice how good compassion feels** –studies show that compassion and compassionate action activate the brains reward centre
5. **For caregivers** – research suggests that compassion is contagious so if you want to help teach and cultivate compassion, lead by example (remember those mirror neurons?)
6. **Meditating** - a compassionate approach to others shifts resting brain activation to the left hemisphere, a region associated with happiness and boosting immune functions
7. **Talking about what we are thankful for**—in classrooms, at the dinner table or in a diary— it boosts happiness, social well-being and health outcomes
8. **Technique for showing compassion – “3Ts”**
Talk, take time and therapeutic touch

Even though we are on the wave of a digital era, compassion is still regarded as a valuable tool for those who want to start an epidemic of change and shape the future of innovative and compassionate healthcare provision. Lack of compassion has prompted policy makers and health providers to be more prepared and aim to provide more clinically compassionate and compatible working environments. Longitudinal follow-up studies will have to determine if such beneficial changes can be maintained and how these changes can be sustained. The neuroscience of compassion is actually still in its infancy and has, so far, only been studied cross-sectionally (15).

Compassionate care is still expected by patients, it matters to them and it remains a professional obligation of all HCPs.

Want to give yourself, others and health care a boost? Give away your kindness and let's start an epidemic!

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