Cognitively-Based Compassion Training

University of Arizona

Contemplative Pedagogy
Faculty and Professional Learning Community

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Today

- Overview of compassion
  - Define compassion and what it does for us
  - Mention findings from recent compassion studies
- Introduce Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT)
- Brief discussion, questions
- Guided meditation practice
Ask yourself...

What would our world be like if we could turn toward all people, all beings, ourselves included, with attention, impartiality, gratitude, kindness, empathy, love, compassion, and altruism?

With tender endearment and the deep understanding that, very simply, we are all here together and that we all need each other?

Wouldn’t a world like that be wonderful?
What is compassion (Buddhist view)?

- Highly valued way of being (thinking, feeling, behaving).
- Two dimensions: love and compassion
  - “Opposite sides of the same coin”
- Genuine and heartfelt wish for happiness (love), and
- Wish for freedom from suffering and its causes (compassion) that...
- In its purist, is altruistic in its generosity with no expectation of compensation or return of any kind.
What is compassion (Western view)?

- **Def.** The feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a readiness to help, if needed.
  - Includes compassion for one’s self.
  - Characterized by feelings of warmth, concern, care.
- One of a family of humanistic, affiliative, pro-social emotions (inc. empathy, sympathy).
  - All have cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions.

**Question:** Why would humans all beings evolve an emotion that enhances the welfare of others at a potential expense to themselves?
Why we need compassion

**Survival and Reproduction**

- Survival, for all beings, depends on:
  - Investing positively in interpersonal relationships,
  - Understanding our own and others’ emotions, needs, and intentions.

- Compassionate emotions, then…
  - Protect vulnerable offspring who need social connection and care.
  - Help form and maintain intimate bonds with partners who can offer protection and care in times of need.
Why we need compassion

Cooperative Community Relationships

- Compassion helps people have more cooperative, trustworthy, and mutually beneficial relationships and exchanges...
- Particularly in contexts and cultures where norms and values reward individualism and self centeredness.
Why we need compassion

“From my own limited experience I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquility comes from the development of love and compassion.

The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being becomes.

Cultivating a close, warm-hearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease.

This helps remove whatever fears or insecurities we may have and gives us the strength to cope with any obstacles we encounter.

It is the ultimate source of success in life.”

- Tenzin Gyatso, H.H. XIV Dalai Lama
Why we need compassion

Compassion training improves:

- Depression (Desbordes, 2012)
- Hope in disadvantaged youth (Pace, 2012)
- Empathic accuracy (Mascaro, 2012)
- Social connection and affiliation (Hutcherson, 2008; Fredrickson, 2008)*
- Immune, inflammation, genetic markers
  - Interleukin-6 (IL-6) (Pace, 2009)
  - Cortisol (Pace, 2010; 2012)
  - C-reactive protein (Mascaro, 2012)
  - Telomerase activity (Jacobs, 2011; Hogue, 2013)*
- Cardiovascular health
  - Cardiac vagal tone (parasympathetic functioning) (Kok, 2013)*
- Pain intensity (Carson, 2005)*

Breast cancer survivors (Dodds et al, 2014)

- Depression
- Anxiety (Fear of recurrence)
- Avoidance of intrusion
- Fatigue/vitality
- Immune fx, inflammation
  - Stress hormone cortisol (slope)
  - Stress-related inflammation (IL-6)
- Persisted at 1 mo FU
- More practice, more improvement
Empathy hurts. Compassion soothes.

- Empathy is feeling with another; uncomfortable.
- Empathy task with novice meditators.
- Compassion training activated brain reward areas associated with positive feelings (e.g., affiliation, love).

Suggests:
- Compassion buffers empathic distress.
- Is a coping strategy that fosters positive feelings when confronted with distress of others.
- Feels as good as chocolate!

Distinct neural reward network (mOFC, pallidum, putamenVTA/SN) (Klimecki et al., 2013).
Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT)

- Emory University - Tibet Partnership
- Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi, Ph.D.
  - Emory University Dept. of Religion
  - Drepung Loseling Monastery N.A.
  - UA Dept. of Psychiatry
- Brooke Dodson-Lavelle, MA (Mind & Life);
  Brendan Ozawa de Silva, Ph.D. (Life University)
- Secularized adaptation of 2,500 yr. old Tibetan Buddhist methods to cultivate compassion.
CBCT approach

- **Lojong.** Trans. “mind training” or “thought transformation.”
  - Specific purpose - social connectivity.
  - Transforms subjective experience from a self focus toward a self AND other focus (inclusive, unifying).

- Lojong has an **analytic orientation.**
  - Insight via close observation and reflection.
  - One is curious, inquisitive, investigative.
  - Gives CBCT its cognitive orientation.

- CBCT has an **affective component.**
  - Affects are concurrently evoked, experienced.

- CBCT has a **mindfulness component**
  - Attentional stability; non-reactive awareness.

- **Lamrim** (“stages on the path” Atisha, 11th c).
  - Sequence of graded steps form internal logic of CBCT topics.
CBCT structure & process

- **Structure**
  - Group format
  - 8 weekly 2-hr classes; varies
  - Topics structured, graded, iterative
  - Guided meditations (~30 min)
  - Several meditation practices
    - 2 mindfulness (FA and OA)
    - 2 lamrim (E&E and 7-pt C&E)
  - Contemplative reflection
  - Home meditation X3 per week; audio recordings
  - Personal journal

- **Process**
  - Education and skills training, not therapy or support group.
  - Experiences are observed, not interpreted or processed.
  - Approach is to release and allow, not manage or fix.
Don’t train in compassion *per se*

- Compassion is an innate capacity. It is already present.
- Needs to be valued, uncovered, strengthened, elongated.
- Buddhist scholars…
  - When the pre-conditions are met, compassion arises spontaneously (Negi, 2013).
  - Compassion is an emergent process (Halifax, 2012).
Pre-conditions: CBCT topics and themes

1. Developing Attention & Stability of Mind
   ▪ Mind too busy to attune to compassion.
   ▪ Focused concentration; flashlight.
   ▪ Breath is object of meditation.

2. Insight into the Nature of Mind
   ▪ Mental experiences change and are impermanent; detachment, acceptance.
   ▪ Open awareness, floodlight.
   ▪ Relaxed, non-reactive observation of mind’s contents.

3. Self-Compassion
   ▪ Basic desire for happiness and freedom from suffering and causes.
     ▪ Suffering largely caused by attitudes, beliefs, perceptions.
     ▪ Efficacy attributions (change is possible; I can change).
   ▪ Commit to examine mental habits.
   ▪ Self awareness and introspection.

4. Equanimity and Impartiality
   ▪ All people/beings share same desires for happiness and freedom as we; no differences.
   ▪ Impartiality; bias and prejudice illogical.
Pre-conditions: CBCT topics and themes

5. Appreciation & Gratitude for Others
   ▪ Profound interconnection and interdependence.
   ▪ Gratitude for the beneficence of countless others known and unknown.

6. Affection & Empathy
   ▪ Gratitude leads to endearment (affection).
   ▪ Affection stimulates empathy for suffering of others.

7. Aspiring Love & Compassion
   ▪ Affection and empathy lead to:
     ▪ Love: Wish for happiness;
     ▪ Compassion: Wish for freedom.
   ▪ Evoke feelings of love and compassion.

8. Active Love & Compassion
   ▪ Deepen commitment to personally become involved as needed.
"A warm-hearted attitude and sense of affection and caring ease our communication and interaction with others, since we can see others more as potential friends and fellow human beings rather than as potential enemies or “others” who are alien, strange, and different to us.

Seeking well-being for others means that we are far less likely to engage in behaviors that promote self-interest while harming others.

Since such dishonorable and unethical actions always have to be hidden from public view, we also have fewer secrets to hide, allowing us to be more transparent and open in our interactions with others.

This in turn brings self-confidence and trust in our relationships, and that trust brings genuine friendships."

- Tenzin Gyatso, H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama
“As compassion deepens, we find ourselves developing a nobility of the heart.

Increasingly, and often to our surprise, we respond to difficult situations with calmness, clarity, and directness.

A quiet fearlessness or confidence is present as we no longer fear that we will compromise our own integrity.

We find, too, a joy which arises from the knowledge that our every act is meaningful and helpful to the world.”

- Ken McLeod
Brief comments before meditation?
Let’s meditate!
"We are all profoundly interconnected and interdependent.

Reflect now on the kindness and generosity of innumerable others, both known and unknown, who have made a significant difference in your life.

Allow gratitude to arise in your heart.” (Week 5)