

A Guide to Cultivating Compassion in Your Life, With 7 Practices

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

I believe compassion to be one of the few things we can practice that will bring immediate and long-term happiness to our lives. I’m not talking about the short-term gratification of pleasures like sex, drugs or gambling (though I’m not knocking them), but something that will bring true and lasting happiness. The kind that sticks.

The key to developing compassion in your life is to make it a daily practice.

Meditate upon it in the morning (you can do it while checking email), think about it when you interact with others, and reflect on it at night. In this way, it becomes a part of your life. Or as the Dalai Lama also said, “This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness.”

Definition

Let’s use the Wikipedia definition of Compassion:

Compassion is an emotion that is a sense of shared suffering, most often combined with a desire to alleviate or reduce the suffering of another; to show special kindness to those who suffer. Compassion essentially arises through empathy, and is often characterized through actions, wherein a person acting with compassion will seek to aid those they feel compassionate for.

Compassionate acts are generally considered those which take into account the suffering of others and attempt to alleviate that suffering as if it were one’s own. In this sense, the various forms of the Golden Rule are clearly based on the concept of compassion.

Compassion differs from other forms of helpful or humane behavior in that its focus is primarily on the alleviation of suffering.

Benefits

Why develop compassion in your life? Well, there are scientific studies that suggest there are physical benefits to practicing compassion — people who practice it produce 100 percent more DHEA, which is a hormone that counteracts the aging process, and 23 percent less cortisol — the “stress hormone.”

But there are other benefits as well, and these are emotional and spiritual. The main benefit is that it helps you to be more happy, and brings others around you to be more happy. If we agree that it is a common aim of each of us to strive to be happy, then compassion is one of the main tools for achieving that happiness. It is therefore of utmost importance that we cultivate compassion in our lives and practice compassion every day.

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How do we do that? This guide contains 7 different practices that you can try out and perhaps incorporate into your every day life.

7 Compassion Practices

Morning ritual. Greet each morning with a ritual. Try this one, suggest by the Dalai Lama: “Today I am fortunate to have woken up, I am alive, I have a precious human life, I am not going to waste it. I am going to use all my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others, to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, I am going to have kind thoughts towards others, I am not going to get angry or think badly about others, I am going to benefit others as much as I can.” Then, when you’ve done this, try one of the practices below.

Empathy Practice. The first step in cultivating compassion is to develop empathy for your fellow human beings. Many of us believe that we have empathy, and on some level nearly all of us do. But many times we are centered on ourselves (I’m no exception) and we let our sense of empathy get rusty. Try this practice: Imagine that a loved one is suffering. Something terrible has happened to him or her. Now try to imagine the pain they are going through. Imagine the suffering in as much detail as possible. After doing this practice for a couple of weeks, you should try moving on to imagining the suffering of others you know, not just those who are close to you.

Commonalities practice. Instead of recognizing the differences between yourself and others, try to recognize what you have in common. At the root of it all, we are all human beings. We need food, and shelter, and love. We crave attention, and recognition, and affection, and above all, happiness. Reflect on these commonalities you have with every other human being, and ignore the differences. One of my favorite exercises comes from a great article from Ode Magazine — it’s a five-step exercise to try when you meet friends and strangers. Do it discreetly and try to do all the steps with the same person. With your attention geared to the other person, tell yourself:

Step 1: “Just like me, this person is seeking happiness in his/her life.”

Step 2: “Just like me, this person is trying to avoid suffering in his/her life.”

Step 3: “Just like me, this person has known sadness, loneliness and despair.”

Step 4: “Just like me, this person is seeking to fill his/her needs.”

Step 5: “Just like me, this person is learning about life.”

Relief of suffering practice. Once you can empathize with another person, and understand his humanity and suffering, the next step is to want that person to be free from suffering. This is the heart of compassion — actually the definition of it. Try this exercise: Imagine the suffering of a human being you’ve met recently. Now imagine that you are the one going through that suffering. Reflect on how much you would like that suffering to end. Reflect on how happy you would be if another human being desired your suffering to end, and acted upon it. Open your heart to that human being and if you feel

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even a little that you'd want their suffering to end, reflect on that feeling. That's the feeling that you want to develop. With constant practice, that feeling can be grown and nurtured.

Act of kindness practice. Now that you've gotten good at the 4th practice, take the exercise a step further. Imagine again the suffering of someone you know or met recently. Imagine again that you are that person, and are going through that suffering. Now imagine that another human being would like your suffering to end — perhaps your mother or another loved one. What would you like for that person to do to end your suffering? Now reverse roles: you are the person who desires for the other person's suffering to end. Imagine that you do something to help ease the suffering, or end it completely. Once you get good at this stage, practice doing something small each day to help end the suffering of others, even in a tiny way. Even a smile, or a kind word, or doing an errand or chore, or just talking about a problem with another person. Practice doing something kind to help ease the suffering of others. When you are good at this, find a way to make it a daily practice, and eventually a throughout-the-day practice.

Those who mistreat us practice. The final stage in these compassion practices is to not only want to ease the suffering of those we love and meet, but even those who mistreat us. When we encounter someone who mistreats us, instead of acting in anger, withdraw. Later, when you are calm and more detached, reflect on that person who mistreated you. Try to imagine the background of that person. Try to imagine what that person was taught as a child. Try to imagine the day or week that person was going through, and what kind of bad things had happened to that person. Try to imagine the mood and state of mind that person was in — the suffering that person must have been going through to mistreat you that way. And understand that their action was not about you, but about what they were going through. Now think some more about the suffering of that poor person, and see if you can imagine trying to stop the suffering of that person. And then reflect that if you mistreated someone, and they acted with kindness and compassion toward you, whether that would make you less likely to mistreat that person the next time, and more likely to be kind to that person. Once you have mastered this practice of reflection, try acting with compassion and understanding the next time a person treats you. Do it in little doses, until you are good at it. Practice makes perfect.

Evening routine. I highly recommend that you take a few minutes before you go to bed to reflect upon your day. Think about the people you met and talked to, and how you treated each other. Think about your goal that you stated this morning, to act with compassion towards others. How well did you do? What could you do better? What did you learn from your experiences today? And if you have time, try one of the above practices and exercises.

These compassionate practices can be done anywhere, any time. At work, at home, on the road, while traveling, while at a store, while at the home of a friend or family member. By sandwiching your day with a morning and evening ritual, you can frame your day properly, in an attitude of trying to practice compassion and develop it within yourself. And with practice, you can begin to do it throughout the day, and throughout your lifetime.

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This, above all, will bring happiness to your life and to those around you.

“My message is the practice of compassion, love and kindness. These things are very useful in our daily life, and also for the whole of human society these practices can be very important.” – Dalai Lama