Compassion Dr Andrew Tresidder

As humans, we are social creatures. We are designed to show care, kindness and compassion. Whatever our role in life, we all benefit from showing – and from receiving – compassionate care.

The Dalai Lama described compassion as “a sensitivity to the suffering of self and others, with a deep commitment to relieve it”. The Latin derivation means fellow-suffering. Anthony William states: “Compassion is the understanding of suffering. There is no peace, joy or hope until those who suffer are understood. Compassion is the soul of these words; without it, they are empty. Compassion fills them with truth, honour and purpose”. Compassion is: Treating someone as you would wish to be treated…listening without judging...and doing your best in every interaction.

Compassionate care has been described as ”attention in life and living to the giving of understanding, support, advice, care and reassurance that helps foster health and wellbeing”. Compassionate practice in healthcare increases patient and staff satisfaction, and results in improved diagnosis, improved outcomes, fewer errors and complaints.

Biologically there are three mammalian emotional systems:

1. Drive; to motivate us towards resources, with feelings of wanting, pursuing, achieving, progressing and focused (dopamine dominant).
2. Soothing; affiliative, with feelings of contentment, safety and connection (opiate and oxytocin) – related to the parasympathetic nervous system.
3. Threat; safety-seeking, threat-focused, with feelings of anger, anxiety and disgust (adrenaline dominant) – related to the sympathetic nervous system.

The second of these is deeply involved in nurture and compassion and is integral to the nature of a human being. It both requires and gives rise to secure attachments and results in emotional maturity of the limbic system. It is both a masculine and a feminine aspect, but also deeply relates to the role of mother and maternal care and support.

Unfortunately sympathetic drive (fear, fight and flight) shuts down the parasympathetic system; and even worse, it shuts down our frontal cortex activity in the brain and prevents us from thinking rationally. So, it not only stops us being able to rationalize, but also to nurture. An environment with fear as a dominant emotion can erode compassion.

Compassion is a two way process: in energetic terms there is a connection which results in an energy flow of love towards the person you are being compassionate to and in a connection of the compassionate person to a deeper aspect of humanity and a wellspring of love. Compassion is a win-win situation – as long as it includes self-compassion.

Kindness, support and love towards another *through* your ‘self’ has positive benefits for giver and receiver. It allows us to be energised and refreshed by a flow of love and kindness that has its source beyond us, in a higher dimension. It should include self-compassion. If it doesn’t, the compassion is coupled with self-denial or martyrdom, which can be exhausting and is unsustainable.

If we are kind to ourselves, allow ourselves to be present, and to practice an ’inner smile’, then we nourish ourselves. We can also function well, perform well, and be compassionate with ease. If in addition we allow ourselves mindfully to observe the present moment in a non-judgmental fashion and remember to be grateful for each moment of life, then we are a long way towards inner refreshment and effortless ability to be compassionate to self and others.

From inner love and inner strength, compassion flows easily, even effortlessly, as we develop ourselves in this way. If we feel valued and even thanked, then the flow of compassion is ever easier.

An attitude of gratitude makes the world go round

Compassion may be a tender flower, needing a supportive environment to flourish – but it is the most beautiful of flowers, smiling at, and uplifting us!

Dr Paquita de Zulueta, a London GP, has written an excellent paper on Compassionate Leadership in Healthcare <https://www.dovepress.com/developing-compassionate-leadership-in-health-care-an-integrative-revi-peer-reviewed-fulltext-article-JHL>

[www.healthandself.care](http://www.healthandself.care) pp164-167 and 11-14