

SPREAD compassion



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Leadership Institute

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WHY SPREAD COMPASSION?

This is a time of the greatest collective upheaval any of us has ever experienced in our lifetimes, with structural & systemic inequalities and a global pandemic threatening our health, safety, and security, affecting each of us in different ways, and some disproportionately more than others.

At SIYLI, we work to create the conditions for a more peaceful world, and focus on building skills for emotional intelligence, including presence, resilience, empathy, and compassion - the latter being an essential, and trainable, skill to cultivate at this time.

The word compassion literally means "to suffer with" and it involves feeling moved by others' suffering to respond to their pain, and we all know there is tremendous suffering happening in the world right now. When we cultivate compassion, we can build connection, and tend to both the suffering in ourselves and in others. From this place, we build resilience and engage prosocial brain regions and behaviors, equipping us to step forward in the ways that are needed for ourselves and others.

The definition for compassion we use in SIY comes from Joan Halifax, a pioneer in bringing compassion into healthcare. "Compassion may be defined as the capacity to be attentive to the experience of others, to wish the best for others, and to sense what will truly serve others."

Mindfulness allows us to become more aware of what's present within and around us and in others, and compassion asks what is needed. Together, this allows us to meet challenges with both attention and action. Compassion gives us resources to respond to people in challenging situations, and enables us to be engaged and motivated to help.

Counter-intuitively, one of the best things you can do for your own well-being is develop your sense of care for others. There are many scientific studies that show the benefits of establishing deeper connections with others and offering compassion. We frequently hear from participants that these practices are quite moving and powerful. We also know that compassion is a human capacity that we can grow and develop through practice.



So, we'd like to come together to practice and cultivate compassion. We hope that this guide helps you to spread compassion and take compassionate action in your communities, both local and the global interconnected community we are.



COMPASSION: KEY TO RESILIENCE

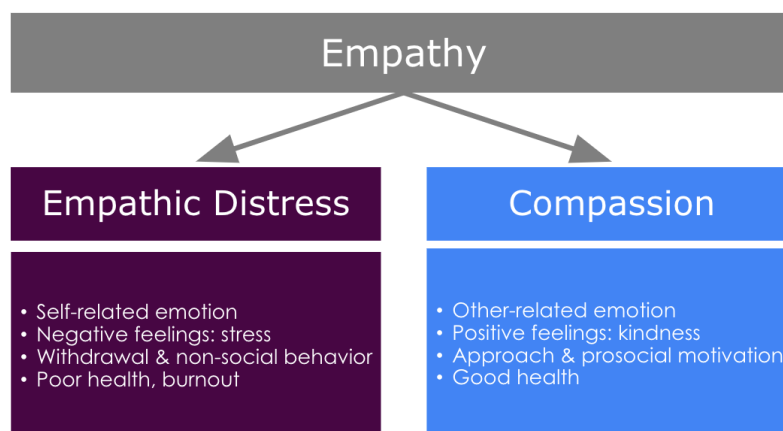


What makes compassion such a valuable quality and skill? It's the key to resilience, both for our own personal challenges and when responding to the challenges of others.

Resilience—the ability to skillfully cope with adversity, challenge and crisis—is essential to our emotional well-being. It enables us to recover from challenges of any kind, whether small struggles or life-changing circumstances, and to maintain our engagement and motivation towards our goals. It also helps us respond to others in need, as opposed to avoiding, panicking, losing hope, or burning out.

When feeling with and for those in the world, we may take on those feelings and feel overwhelmed and powerless about what to do in response to the magnitude of suffering that we are seeing. Our response to others begins with empathy—awareness of others and their experience. Empathy is critical for connecting with others and building relationships, but empathy in response to people experiencing difficult situations can go into two different directions: empathic distress or compassion. Empathic distress feels bad, weakens our sense of connection with others, and makes us less likely to help, and leads to stress, withdrawal, and burnout.

Compassion, however, avoids this and instead leads to a greater sense of connection and engagement with others. Researchers Klimecki and Singer found that compassion includes characteristics of kindness and positive emotions, good health, and motivation to do good.



Research findings from Klimecki et al. suggest that the deliberate cultivation of compassion offers a new coping strategy that fosters positive affect even when confronted with the distress of others. The key point is that compassion provides an alternative to empathetic distress, and allows us to maintain our ability to cope with and provide support towards challenging experiences we are witnessing in others and out in the world.

When compassion is directed towards ourselves (self-compassion) it also supports personal resilience. When we can be more understanding, accepting, and kinder, towards ourselves, including our mistakes or perceived flaws or shortcomings, it allows us to maintain motivation towards our goals even in the face of setbacks.

The important point to emphasize is, in Tania Singer’s words:

“Compassion offers a trainable strategy for... overcoming adverse experiences by strengthening resilience.”

To begin strengthening our attention and capacity to offer compassion, we invite you to pause and reflect on when you’ve seen or experienced compassion in action.

How do you tend to respond when you witness suffering in others? What about in yourself?

Has there been a time where you’ve responded with compassion? If so, what was that like for you and what was the impact? If not, what got in the way of offering compassion?

When is a time when you’ve witnessed compassion? What was the impact it had?

When is a time you’ve received compassion? How did it feel to receive this?



BUILDING CAPACITY FOR COMPASSION

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison suggest that as little as two weeks of compassion meditation training can alter the way people respond to the suffering of others. The compassion meditation group practiced what's commonly called a loving-kindness meditation, a simple meditation that involves directing well wishes toward other people (as well as ourselves). This powerful practice typically focuses inward with ourselves initially, then moves to loved ones and finally toward people we don't know. This kind of loving-kindness meditation is a little like exercising a muscle, gradually increasing the "weight" in terms of the relationships as our compassion expands.

Before we practice, it's important to know that sometimes it might feel a bit robotic or unnatural, or you don't feel what you might expect to feel with the words loving kindness; the good thing is it doesn't mean that nothing is happening or that it's not working. Research shows that the effect and benefits come from the intention and doing the practice (and the act of wishing well). And you can also play with the words so that they resonate more for you.

With that, let's practice.



LOVING KINDNESS MEDITATION

- Start by finding a posture that feels both relaxed and alert. You may want to have your feet on the floor, your hands on your thighs. You may keep your eyes open with a soft focus on one point on the floor in front of you, or you can close your eyes if you're comfortable doing so. Allowing the spine to lift, the shoulders to relax.
- Start by doing one to two minutes of breathing meditation. Let yourself settle into the present moment, using the breath as an anchor for attention. If the breath is uncomfortable for you for any reason, please find one sound you hear right now and feel free to use that sound as the anchor for attention.
- Set an intention for your practice.
- Now, picture someone you know and care about—someone for whom it's easy to feel love and compassion.
- Focus on that feeling of love and compassion. Look at this person in your mind and tell them: "May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be free from suffering."
- Repeat this for three to four minutes. Feel free to replace these specific well wishes with whatever works best for you. Let yourself fully embrace the experience of wishing the best for this person.
- Now switch from imagining someone else to imagining yourself. Again, focus on your sense of love and compassion. See yourself in your mind and repeat the same wishes: "May I be safe. May I be healthy. May I be free from suffering."
- Repeat for three to four minutes. Let yourself fully embrace the experience of wishing well for yourself and others.
- Finish with one minute of breathing meditation.
- Notice how you feel now compared to before you did the practice.



LISTEN TO THIS 10-MINUTE GUIDED LOVING KINDNESS MEDITATION

LINK: [BIT.DO/LOVING-KINDNESS](https://bit.do/loving-kindness)

LEARN MORE ABOUT BUILDING YOUR COMPASSION PRACTICE WITH
[THESE TIPS FROM BERKELEY'S GREATER GOOD SCIENCE CENTER](#)



SELF-COMPASSION

Starting by feeling compassion towards others is a great way to transition into feeling compassion for yourself and, as Jack Kornfield says, “if your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.”

In the core Search Inside Yourself program we talk about the benefits of self-compassion for our emotional well-being and resilience, and reference the work of Dr. Kristin Neff and Dr. Chris Germer when presenting its three components:

- 1) Mindfulness: Being open to the reality of the present moment, with curiosity and kindness, and acknowledging what we’re thinking and feelings. Taking a balanced approach to one's emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated.
- 2) Self-kindness: Demonstrating that we care about ourselves just as we care about a good friend. Being warm towards oneself when encountering pain and personal shortcomings, rather than ignoring them or hurting oneself with self-criticism.
- 3) Common humanity: Recognizing that challenge and suffering we’re facing is part of the shared human experience, as a way to not minimize what we’re feeling in comparison, and also to not judge ourselves for our experience or that “there’s something wrong with me” - that this is part of being human.

While many people think of self-compassion as being “soft” or worry that we’ll lose our edge, Dr. Germer and Dr. Neff describe self-compassion as consisting of both yin and yang energies: one entails “being with” (in a comforting, soothing, and validating way), and the other is about action (protecting, providing, motivating); as with compassion there is the acknowledgment of suffering, and the desire to relieve it.

And the research supports this: [Breines & Chen](#) found that people who practiced self-compassion were more likely to have a growth mindset, more likely to want to fix a past ethical transgression, had more motivation to improve and spent more effort improving.



The takeaway from this study is that self-compassion was a more effective way to meet our challenges than doing nothing, and more effective than another common strategy, trying to “boost our self-esteem” by skipping over the difficulty and emphasizing a positive self-image.

And while self-compassion does entail action and helps us maintain motivation, self-compassion begins with the intention of wholehearted kindness and acceptance towards ourselves and our experience—not as a tool to change our emotions, fix, or feel better in the moment. “When we struggle, we practice self-compassion not to feel better,” says Dr. Germer, “but because we feel bad.”

*“If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.”
- Jack Kornfield*



SELF-COMPASSION EXERCISE

Think of a current situation in your life where you're experiencing some challenge or difficulty (but not too difficult for the purpose of this exercise - maybe a 6 out of 10). Take a few moments to bring the experience to mind and body, and then reflect on the following questions:

What am I experiencing? What sensations, thoughts, emotions are present?

How do I remind myself I'm not alone in this, and this is part of being human?

What do I need? How can I be with myself? And what can I do?

What can I say to myself in response to this situation, as if I were speaking to a dear friend?



TRY TAKING A SELF-COMPASSION BREAK WITH THIS MEDITATION, INSPIRED BY DR. KRISTIN NEFF

LINK: [HTTPS://SIYLI.ORG/RESOURCES/GUIDED-MEDITATION-SELF-COMPASSION-BREAK](https://siyli.org/resources/guided-meditation-self-compassion-break)



PRACTICE OFFERING COMPASSION TO YOURSELF AND OTHERS

LINK: [HTTPS://SIYLI.ORG/RESOURCES/GUIDED-MEDITATION-COMPASSION-FOR-YOURSELF-OTHERS](https://siyli.org/resources/guided-meditation-compassion-for-yourself-others)

LEARN MORE ABOUT SELF-COMPASSION WITH THESE EXERCISES & PRACTICES FROM DR. KRISTIN NEFF



CONSIDER COMPASSION

Now that we've shared some of the benefits of compassion with you, take a moment to consider how compassion might impact your life, personally and/or professionally:



What would it look like to offer yourself compassion?

What would it look like to apply more compassion in your life?

How might compassion impact the way you relate to yourself and those around you?

How might compassion impact the way you approach your work, roles, responsibilities, tasks?



LEADING WITH COMPASSION

At SIYLI, we believe everyone is a leader and has the potential to have a powerful and meaningful impact both through our actions and how we show up. The role of compassion in leadership is well-summarized by Dr. Thupten Jinpa, one of the leading researchers at Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education:

“Having compassion for others frees us from fearing...it turns our attention outward, expanding our perspective, making our own problems...part of something bigger than us that we are all in together.”

Thupten Jinpa further explains there are three core pillars to compassionate leadership:

- 1) Conceptually Understand the problems and situations your peers and employees are facing - people around you want to know that you "get" their challenges;
- 2) Let people know that you understand them on an emotional level and feel what they feel;
- 3) People want to know that you have their interests at heart and have their back.

Behind all three concepts is the powerful switch in mindset from "me" to "we." It's no longer about the individual, but about the group as a whole. Adopting these principles speaks to the adage that people can go further together than an individual can go on their own.

From here, let's explore how you can extend the benefits of compassion beyond your own life and for the benefit of others.



SENSING WHAT WILL TRULY SERVE OTHERS

Before stepping into compassionate action, first foster empathy and then get curious about what would be of service.

As you work with or engage with others during a difficult situation, step outside of your perspective and imagine what they might be experiencing:

- How might this be impacting them in their day to day personal and work lives?
- What might they be thinking or worrying about?
- What might they be feeling?
- What might they be needing in this situation?

THEN, ASK YOURSELF:

WHAT AM I AWARE OF? WHAT IS NEEDED? HOW CAN I BE OF SERVICE?

See what thoughts, feelings, words, or images arise:

- At the level of the head, are there any thoughts or words that come up?
- In the body, are there any emotions, instincts, or impulses to act?
- In the heart, are there any emotions or values that come up?
- Is there a word or phrase that captures what would truly be of service?

Give them space below:



COMMITMENT TO COMPASSION

Reread what you wrote above, and from there crystallize this into a Commitment to Compassion.

Let it all sink in and soften any need to have the right or best answer. What came up may be a shift in your awareness, or a movement to act, or even the recognition that there's more to learn or understand.

How do I want to show up for others?

What do I feel deeply committed to doing?

What might get in the way of this that I can prepare for?

What supports and sustains my capacity to show up in this way?



WISHING WELL

Continuing to sense what would be of service,
complete the following phrases:

May you live with.....

May you be.....

May you be free from....

May you think....

May you remember....

May you be filled with.....

May you be held in....

May you feel....

May you know....

May you....

Reread what you wrote and select the 3-5 phrases that
most resonate for you, becoming your own Loving
Kindness practice to spread compassion.

May You, May I, May We....



May you be safe.
May you be healthy.
May you #SpreadCompassion.



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