

Exercises in Compassion



People who practice kindness and compassion are happier.

Practicing compassion makes us: feel good, activating pleasure circuits and leading to lasting increases in self-reported happiness; reduces the risk of heart disease. Our minds wander less; we're more optimistic and supportive; we make better friends with greater satisfaction and growth, we're more positive, and less vulnerable to stress and harm to the immune system.

The good news is that 'yes' you can practice compassion and get better at it. And remember this - When we think [we're capable of making a difference](#), we're less likely to curb our compassion. So keep building your capability and you'll be able to practice your compassion even more.

How can you practice compassion in your life?

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

Create **BOOKENDS** for your day.

Meditate on it in
the morning

Think about it
when you
interact with
others

Reflect on it at
night

Self-compassion

- 1.** The 3 core features of self-compassion are: **self-kindness**, **common humanity** and **mindfulness** (according to Dr Kristin Neff). It's about extending compassion to yourself despite perceived inadequacy or fear. Note I said 'perceived'. So the self-kindness is being kind to yourself regarding your personal shortcomings rather than ignoring them. Common humanity is recognising that your perceived pain and shortcomings are part of the shared human experience. And mindfulness, here, is taking a balanced approach to the negative emotions, being in that objective non-judgemental, receptive mind state. Being open and willing to be aware and work 'through' the emotions or experience. [Click for link](#).
- 2.** It's no surprise that troubled people (and not so troubled people) can reap enormous benefits by keeping a journal that focuses their attention on the good things in life. [Click for link](#).
- 3.** Self-compassion can help you overcome procrastination! [Click for link](#).



7 Compassion Practices

The practice of compassion is often described in a series of steps similar to that described below.

1. Morning ritual

Greet each morning with a ritual. Try this one, suggested by the Dalai Lama:

"Today I'm 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, work your way through one of the practices below.

2. 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 centred 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're 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.

3. Commonalities practice

Instead of recognising the differences between yourself and others, try to recognise what you have in common. At the root of it all, we're 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 the best 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."

4. Relief of suffering practice

Once you can empathise with another person, and understand her 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're 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 on it. Open your heart to that human being and if you feel 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.



5. 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're 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're 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're good at this, find a way to make it a daily practice, and eventually a throughout-the-day practice.

6. 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're 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're good at it. Practice makes perfect.

7. Evening routine

I highly recommend that you take a few minutes before you go to bed to reflect upon your day. Think and write about the people you met and talked to, and how you treated each other. Think and write 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 shop, while at the home of a friend or family member. By sandwiching your day with a morning and evening ritual, you can frame or bookend 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.

This, above all, will bring happiness to your life and to those around you." ¹

¹ Adapted from <http://www.seedsofcompassion.org/why/>



Why would you practice compassion at work?

“Compassion is one of the great unheralded traits of business leadership. Compassion requires you to subjugate your own need for attention and self-esteem to the needs of others around you. You care and you are sincere in your caring. True compassion in the business world is very rare.

Many people confuse sympathy with compassion. They believe they're being compassionate when they're really being sympathetic. Sympathy is feeling other's suffering with a desire to be helpful. Compassion is unconditional acceptance with the ability to see the essence in all things. Compassion goes right to our hearts and says, “I see you. I know you. You are valued and needed.” I would add to that “And I'm here for you.”

“Considered the highest expression of humanness, compassion is not a single virtue but a distillation of all the virtues. Compassion is a blend of fairness, kindness, gentleness, honesty, respect, courage and love. If, in our daily response to life, we express appropriately any or all of these virtues, we are compassionate beings. Compassion is not sympathy nor is it emotional, and the compassionate person is not easily affected by the emotions of others. Compassion, like empathy acknowledges the emotions of others without entering into or being swayed by these emotions.

How is compassion relevant in the business environment?

Every business involves relationships between people. We can choose the quality of each business relationship, from competitive and hostile, to neutral, to compassionate. Most of the time, we're not conscious about choosing the quality of our business relationships. So, we treat others from a posture of reactivity rather than presence. No one would dispute that cultivating positive relationships is good for business. Yet we spend almost no time and effort acquiring the habits and skills necessary to create harmonious relationships. I believe that compassion is a powerful business tool and leadership skill. Those that cultivate compassion will have a significant advantage over those that do not.

What about being too soft? When business people talk about being too soft or touchy feely, what they're really worried about is either a fear of exploitation or a fear of confronting themselves. Our competitive, individualistic culture conditions us to believe that we're self-reliant and able to stand alone without the help, support, or nurturing of others. Furthermore, to the extent that we need or seek help from others, we believe we show weakness. That weakness can be exploited against us and to other people's advantage.

“Compassion is not about weakness. The ability to show true compassion is neither soft nor touchy feely. It requires great inner strength, courage, and power. It is one of greatest gifts one human can bestow on another.”

~Douglas Noll ~



An exercise in compassion: how would you treat a friend?

Here's what to do:

Take out your journal and answer the following questions:

1. First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about him or herself or is really struggling in some way.
How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you typically talk to your friends.
2. Now think about times when a client has felt bad about something or they or their business is really struggling in some way.
This might include feeling bad about a service or product you provided. How would you respond to your client in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you typically talk to your clients.
3. Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations?
Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.
4. Did you notice a difference?
If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?
5. Please write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself and your client in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.

Why not try treating yourself and your clients like a good friend and see what happens? ²



*"Tenderness and kindness are not signs of
weakness and despair, but manifestations
of strength and resolution"*
~ Kahlil Gibran ~

² Adapted from Dr Kristin Neff <http://self-compassion.org/exercise-1-treat-friend/>