



# Compassion: a Motivator for Teacher Action

by JUDY BERANGER

Definitions of compassion abound throughout the literature. Such definitions extol the quality of caring and being supportive when someone is hurt or troubled – regardless of how one may think or feel about that person. Author Paul Gilbert describes “compassion” as a sensitivity to suffering with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent that suffering. It is not an uncommon circumstance to have someone act in a compassionate manner towards someone they do not love, or towards someone who may appear as quite unlovable. Ultimately, our own lived experience will determine how open we are to expressing compassion. Developing our ability to be compassionate includes working toward letting go of old hurts and sadness.

Compassion appears in many contexts. Four-year-old Timmy can teach us by example. His neighbor had recently lost his wife of fifty years and grieved daily. Tim noticed his neighbor crying and told his Mom he was going next door to help him. He went into the man’s yard, climbed up on his lap and just sat there. When he came home Timmy’s Mom asked him how he had helped their neighbor. “I just helped him cry” was his reply.

## How would you rate your school?

Researcher Deborah Orr reported that an online social psychology course, with its challenge to “spend 24 hours in the most compassionate way possible”, was rated as being the most popular course in the world in 2014! Teachers are often considered exemplary models for compassion and every school has compassion in action to some degree. On a scale of one to ten how would you rate your school? How do you handle rumors, gossip, disrespect, irate colleagues, irate parents, or irate students? Teacher wellness is at its best when compassion has positively influenced school culture. For those who are interested in reducing and even preventing conflict, growing the ability to be compassionate is one of the most dependable strategies. In the words of Goethe: “Treat people as though they were what they ought to be, and you help them

become what they are capable of being.”

Author Dacher Keltner says that compassion is an evolved part of human nature, rooted in our brain and biology, and ready to be cultivated for the greater good. Scientists tell us that the practice of compassion can change our brain and give us much more control over our thoughts and lives. The mind and body are an interconnected system: making positive choices in one area of your life will directly benefit other areas as well.

Do we treat ourselves with compassion? A vital ingredient in teacher well-being is self-compassion, a basic practice of treating ourselves with acceptance, kindness, and gentleness—much as we would treat another person for whom we care deeply. We are more likely to be compassionate with others if we are compassionate within our own self and family.

Murtha, a teacher for close to twenty years and typically a positive person, became negative and reactive, often angry and blaming other teachers, her administration, the school board, her students and life in general. Most of her colleagues started to avoid her while others were drawn to her like magnets. Sophia, one of her colleagues, felt real compassion for Murtha and asked her if anything was wrong. Sophia continued with her compassionate actions and only once stepped into the negativity, quickly pulling herself out. Murtha was insulting when Sophia pulled away but Sophia wouldn’t give up. Murtha eventually responded to Sophia’s compassionate manner explaining that a relationship in her life had gone sour, her dad was dying, her teenager was in trouble, a student was giving her a hard time, the principal was looking at her strangely, her reports weren’t ready and on it went. Murtha was also feeling guilty because she was aware that a couple of students were coming to school every day without lunch and she had been unresponsive to their plight.

Weaved in with compassion was Sophia’s ability to forgive and let go of Murtha’s hurtful comments. She remained compassionate without expectation. Sometimes the person who truly needs compassion

is the one who appears to be less deserving. Even Aesop's children's stories remind us that no matter how small – every act of kindness has value. Sophia's compassionate manner was a catalyst for Murtha to identify that she needed to seek supports.

### Principles of Compassion

Resiliency research by Wolpov et al, inspired the development of six principles for a compassionate approach. Put simply they include:

- 1) Always empower, never disempower;
- 2) Provide unconditional positive regard;
- 3) Maintain high expectations;
- 4) Check assumptions, observe and question;
- 5) Be a relationship coach;
- 6) Provide guided opportunities for participation.

I would suggest the addition of a seventh principle, namely:

7) Self-care and ongoing reflection on the effects of our actions and choices. This principle is an ethical responsibility and allows us to grow compassion and support other people while integrating the other principles into our daily actions. We move from expecting other people to respond first, to taking the initiative to be the one who responds regardless of the situation.

An example of compassion comes from a couple who wanted to rekindle their relationship through counselling. When asked for examples of behaviours that had worked for them in the past they identified expressions of compassion – a sense of knowing each other well enough to respect when either of them needed to be held or simply given some time and space. They came to appreciate again the importance of a smile, eye contact when speaking to each other, kind words, gentle touch and noticing the small but mighty acts of caring. They resolved to commit to continuing these compassionate actions, especially when things were tough. Author John Powell said it well: “It is an absolute certainty that no one can know his own beauty or perceive a sense of his own worth until it has been reflected back to him in the mirror of another loving, caring human being.”

Researcher Kristin Neff asserts that mindfulness (the practice of paying attention to what happens inside and around you with a nonjudgmental attitude) and being aware of the shared suffering of others are both important components of self-compassion. Although it is difficult to separate which of these components is most important in wellbeing, all appear to help decrease self-criticism, increase a sense of connection with others, and promote better emotional responses. Self-compassion allows us the emotional courage to move into areas of deep suffering and pain. I witnessed this tremendous ability to be compassion-

ate through the courageous acts of my dear Father as he endured physical and emotional suffering during the many months leading up to his recent passing.

David Pollay, in *The Law of the Garbage Truck*, suggests that some people can be like garbage trucks. They run around full of garbage, full of frustration, anger, and disappointment. As their garbage piles up, they look for a place to dump it. If you let them, they'll dump it on you. A commitment to self-compassion requires a willingness to implement your own self-care strategies and seek support when facing the prospect of becoming someone else's garbage disposal site!

Author Samantha Gentrup suggests that when we are actively compassionate we:

- Promote and model courteous behavior.
- Provide encouragement, smile and mean it. Small gestures can have a strong effect on energy and mood.
- Cultivate a deep appreciation of others by taking time to get to know and understand them, asking carefully thought-out questions, and listening carefully.
- Be mindful of anyone who seems to be suffering in any way.
- Practice empathetic listening. Pay attention to nuances, nonverbal communication, and body language. Consider what is not said. Imagine that everyone you come in contact with couldn't hear your words. They could only understand the messages you wanted to convey through your actions – all non-verbal. How would you communicate your message? Would it change from the message of your words or would it be the same?
- Listen rather than interrupting with “good advice.”

We all have strengths, much to learn, and a need to belong. Our ability to break an unhealthy habit or turn off an old tape can happen if we choose. Things change when we do.

In the words of Viktor Frankl: “We must never forget that we may find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation we are challenged to change ourselves.”

It is a realistic and sometimes challenging goal to strive to live each day in the way we want to be remembered. Aldous Huxley, asked on his deathbed to sum up what he had learned in his eventful life, said, “It's embarrassing to tell you this, but it seems to come down mostly to just learning to be kinder.”

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