

When Empathy Hurts, Compassion Can Heal

A new neuroscientific study shows that compassion training can help us cope with other people's distress.

BY ADAM HOFFMAN | AUGUST 22, 2013

Empathy can be painful.

Or so suggests a growing body of neuroscientific research. When we witness suffering and distress in others, our natural tendency to empathize can bring us vicarious pain.

Is there a better way of approaching distress in other people? A recent study, published in the journal *Cerebral Cortex*, suggests that we can better cope with others' negative emotions by strengthening our own compassion skills, which the researchers define as "feeling concern for another's suffering and desiring to enhance that individual's welfare."

"Empathy is really important for understanding others' emotions very deeply, but there is a downside of empathy when it comes to the suffering of others," says Olga Klimecki, a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Germany and the lead author of the study. "When we share the suffering of others too much, our negative emotions increase. It carries the danger of an emotional burnout."

The research team sent study participants to a one-day loving-kindness meditation class, which utilized techniques and philosophies from Eastern contemplative traditions. Participants, none of whom had prior meditation experience, practiced extending feelings of warmth and care toward themselves, a close person, a neutral person, a person in difficulty, and complete strangers, as a way of developing their compassion skills.

Both before and after the training, participants were shown videos of people in distress (e.g., crying after their home was flooded). Following exposure to each video, the researchers measured the subjects' emotional responses through a survey. Their brain activity was also recorded using an fMRI machine, a device that tracks real-time blood-flow in the brain, thereby enabling the scientists to see what brain areas were active in response to viewing the videos.

They found that the compassion training led participants to experience significantly more positive emotion when viewing the distressing videos. In other words, they seemed better able to cope with distress than they did before the training—and they coped better than a control group that did not receive the compassion training.

“Through compassion training, we can increase our resilience and approach stressful situations with more positive affect,” says Klimecki.

The positive emotional approach was accompanied by a change in brain activation pattern: Before the training, participants showed activity in an “empathic” network associated with pain perception and unpleasantness; after the training, activity shifted to a “compassionate” network that has been associated with love and affiliation.

Their new brain-activation patterns more closely resembled those of an “expert” who had meditated every day on compassion for more than 35 years, whose brain was scanned by the researchers to provide a point of comparison. This result suggests that the training brought about fundamental changes in the ways their brains processed distressing scenes, strengthening the parts that try to alleviate suffering—an example of neuroplasticity, when the brain physically evolves in response to experience.

Negative emotions did not disappear after the loving-kindness training; it's just that the participants were less likely to feel distressed themselves. According to Klimecki and her colleagues, this suggests that the training allowed participants to stay in touch with the negative emotion from a calmer mindset. “Compassion is a good antidote,” says Klimecki. “It allows us to connect to others' suffering, without being too distressed.”

The main takeaway is that we can shape our own emotional reactions, and can alter the way we feel and respond to certain situations. In other words, says Klimecki, “Our emotions are not set in stone.”

So is taking a compassion course like the one offered through this study the only way to build compassion? Not necessarily. Research suggests you can cultivate a compassionate mindset through encouraging cooperation, practicing mindfulness, refraining from placing blame on others, acting against inequality, and being receptive to others’ feelings without adopting those feelings as your own.

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