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Compassion: Universally Misunderstood

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When people hear the word compassion, they tend to think of kindness. But scientific study has found the core of compassion to be courage.

Rather than defining compassion, kindness is just one way of being compassionate. Imagine a fire officer who regularly puts his or her life in danger to save others. That act in itself is certainly compassionate but, outside of work, he or she might be standoffish, have an irritable temperament or consistently fail to remember birthdays. The point is that kind people don't always have the courage to behave compassionately.

A standard dictionary definition of compassion would read something like, "a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate it". This encapsulates two basic processes. The first is the courage to turn towards, engage and be in touch with pain and distress, rather than opting to avoid or ignore it. The second is the preparedness to acquire the wisdom we need to behave appropriately in the face of suffering.

The courage to be compassionate lies in the willingness to see into the nature and causes of suffering - be that in ourselves, with others or humanity more generally. We are built from genes that have been evolving over millions of years. Those genes built our brains and bodies - we didn't choose them. And those bodies and brains are fragile - we are subject to injuries, a multitude of diseases, decay and eventual death.

Evolved motives in our brains such as status and power-seeking, sex and caring for kin (that we share with other animals), can lead us to get caught up in self-focused ambition and tribalism, and make us capable of terrible cruelties. Humans have been a source of

suffering in each other and animals for thousands of years. The human mind invented torture and can take pleasure in sadistic vengeance. And we, like other animals, are vulnerable to a range of mental maladies such as fear, depression, and paranoia. It takes courage to even begin to understand our own species in this way.

What we also know is that we are socially constructed. If I had been kidnapped as a three-day old baby into a violent drug gang, then the version of Paul Gilbert writing this blog would not exist. A potentially cold, aggressive and defensive version of myself would. It can be very humbling to understand that we are only one possible version of ourselves as a result of our social upbringing and contexts. And this applies to others too.

And so it takes courage to be aware that we are biological beings, built by genes we never chose; pushed and pulled by motives and emotions that are in-built; socially shaped by environments we simply found ourselves in. This is the basis of compassionate wisdom.

Put simply, the way we are is not our fault. How we choose to understand and work with our brains - for the wellbeing of ourselves and others - is, however, very much our responsibility. Just as we have come to understand the importance of hygiene to reduce risk of disease, so we must learn how to build socially just and supportive environments that nurture the best in us. There are many forces that will seek to undermine these efforts, and so effort and courage is required.

People can be frightened of compassion because they think it is a weakness or an indulgence. This is largely because they don't understand it and don't recognise the enormous value in realising the causes of suffering, and our own fragility. Yet, all over the world, academic researchers are revealing that by cultivating compassion, we stimulate many physiological systems that are excellent for our health and happiness. It promotes pro-social and ethical behaviour that we can all benefit from.

We can start with ourselves by spending a few moments each day thinking about how we would be if we were at our compassionate best - how we might think and act. Then we might imagine a difficulty in our lives, breathe deeply and slowly, create a friendly inner-voice tone, and imagine how this wise, compassionate part of us might address the problem. It doesn't take long to see that this will be different to how the angry part or anxious part of us might respond - that side that often just emerges and wants to control us. The more we take time to imagine ourselves at our compassionate best, the greater the chances are that we will become like this - more rooted, caring and assertive.

Compassion is not just about kindness or 'softness' and it is certainly not a weakness - it is one of the most important declarations of strength and courage known to humanity. It is difficult and powerful, infectious and influential. And, crucially, is perhaps the only universally recognised language with the ability to change the world.