

Cultivating a Compassionate Heart: Enhancing Health and Happiness in Ourselves and Our Clients

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We became occupational therapists because of our compassion for others. While patients need compassion, we also have a well inside of us that needs to be replenished. Learning self-compassion and compassion for others can improve health and happiness.

Compassion

Compassion is defined as the sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.¹ This is the ability to feel what others are feeling and take action in a kind, loving way.

Compassion can guide great actions and participation, and improve health and participation in occupations. Compassion can, in fact, be learned. Even brief training in it may strengthen brain connections for pleasure and reward as well as lead to lasting improvements in happiness. It may also reduce the risk of heart disease by boosting the positive effects of the vagus nerve, which helps slow heart rate.²

In research, brain activity changes were noted in people who participated in compassion training. They showed increased activity in neural networks involved in understanding the suffering of others alongside regulating emotions and positive feelings in response to a reward or goal.³ When we are in a happier state, we are able to form more favorable perceptions, impressions, and memories of others.⁴

Connecting to Your Heart

You are probably well-trained at feeling compassion for others, but how often do you feel it for yourself? Cultivate feeling self-compassion, self-love and self-acceptance. Treat yourself with kindness, recognize your shared humanity, and be mindful when considering negative aspects of yourself.⁵ It may help you find forgiveness in yourself and others.

We are taught to do well, and some people are so driven that they are not very kind to themselves. Five common myths of self-compassion are that it will make you complacent, and that it equates to self-pity, weakness, narcissism and selfishness.⁶

One way to develop compassion is to detach from everyday thoughts, emotions and beliefs, and to connect with the part of you that can step back and observe what you are experiencing without judgment and with compassion. This is known as decentering

(perhaps better referred to as recentering). This is commonly seen in both cognitive therapy and mindfulness practices.⁷

By stepping back and observing in a non-judgmental and compassionate way, uncomfortable feelings, thoughts, emotions and sensations may transform. It can help us learn that we do not have to believe all of our thoughts and emotions. You can feel more centered by being more fully in the present moment and be able to better participate in activities of daily living.⁵

Loving-kindness is a meditation practice that brings about positive attitudinal changes as it systematically develops the quality of "loving-acceptance." It acts as a form of self-psychotherapy.⁸

Mindfulness meditation has become very popular. John Kabat-Zinn developed and coined this term following his experiences with Vipassana, a meditation from the Buddhist philosophy that means "clear-seeing" and is similar to Christian contemplative prayer and other spiritual and religious practices. Mindfulness can positively change how you see the world, yourself, your relationships, and other aspects of your life. Mindfulness means to be more aware of your thoughts, feelings and experiences without having to label them as good or bad, or right or wrong.

Mindfulness may be a bit of a misnomer, according to Dan Eisner, OTR/L, who practices these skills and teaches them to people at an inpatient psychiatric hospital and to clients in his own private practice. Mr. Eisner says that it's about stepping back and creating space (i.e. stillness) between our thoughts. Then, we are less identified, making negative thoughts easier to manage. For example: "I am not good enough" becomes "Oh, I am having a thought about not being good enough."

When you allow yourself the space and time to get quiet, your intuition or inner wisdom will speak to you more clearly. It will connect you to your true knowing that can guide you in making the best choices, improve understanding, and assist with creativity, innovation and problem-solving in all areas of your life.

Mindfulness Benefits

Research has shown many benefits of mindfulness, including that it can be an effective treatment for a variety of psychological problems, and is especially effective for reducing anxiety,⁹ depression, and stress; is an effective alternative or supplement to antidepressant medication; and may prevent relapses.¹⁰ It can provide opioid-free pain relief -- this is especially important for those who have a tolerance to opiate-based drugs and who are seeking other ways to reduce their pain.¹¹

Mindfulness has been found useful in a broad range of chronic disorders and problems, and may enhance the ability to cope with distress and disability in everyday life.

Improvements have been consistently seen across several standardized mental health measures, including psychological dimensions of quality of life scales, depression, anxiety, coping style, and other affective dimensions of disability. Improvements were also found in physical well-being, such as medical symptoms, sensory pain, physical impairment, and functional quality-of-life estimates.¹²

A recent study titled "Systematic Review of Mindfulness Practice for Reducing Job Burnout" found that there is strong evidence that mindfulness may reduce job burnout for healthcare practitioners and teachers. Burnout is defined as exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration.¹³

Burnout may create depression, aggression, decreased commitment to patients or clients, psychosomatic manifestations, decreased cognitive performance, motivation and judgment, and physical and mental ailments such as increased blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and depression.¹⁴

Putting it into Practice

Practicing compassion daily for both ourselves and those we serve, and teaching those we serve, can enhance health and happiness. It can assist both children and adults.

Mindfulness meditation is being present with non-judgmental awareness -- allowing thoughts, feelings, and emotions to come and go without getting caught up in them. This can increase awareness, clarity and acceptance of the present reality. It can create a sense of calm, peace and acceptance. Some find it helpful to connect with the heart and a sense of love while practicing it.

Here are some tips for those who want to try mindfulness for themselves:

1. Sit or lie down comfortably with your eyes closed.
2. Bring your awareness and your attention to your breathing.
3. When thoughts, emotions, physical feelings or external sounds occur, simply observe them with a non-judgmental attitude, accepting them and giving them space to come and go.
4. When you notice that your attention has drifted off and you're becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing, without judging yourself.
5. It's natural for thoughts to arise and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, keep bringing your attention back to your breath or be

aware of what is occurring from an observing and loving place. Practice for 1-30 minutes as formal meditation or throughout your daily activities.

To learn more and connect with OTs interested in mind, body, and spirit medicine, prevention and wellness, visit www.HolisticOT.org; the Holistic Occupational Therapy Page groups on Facebook, LinkedIn and Pinterest; follow HolisticOT on Twitter and Instagram; and join the Holistic OT e-mail list.

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