



Personal Growth Relationships Spirituality

What Is Compassion and How Can It Bring Happiness and Build Resilience?

By Brandel France de Bravo

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Compassion is one of those words that no one is entirely sure about. What is it, and how is it different from empathy, pity, or plain-old kindness?

I wasn't really able to answer those questions either until I took an eight-week meditation course developed at Stanford University called Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT™). Dr. Kelly McGonigal, who helped create the curriculum and trained me to become a CCT teacher, says that compassion "is actually a human strength that ...evolved to help you meet stress in a way that is good for you and good for others."

As a certified CCT teacher, one of the exercises I like to begin with is this: think of a time when someone showed you compassion or you behaved compassionately towards someone. How did you know it was compassion and not some other emotion? And, how did it feel in your body? Can you recollect any physical sensations that arose during that experience?

If asked to recall an experience of compassion, I think of the time I lost my child in a crowd. This has happened to many parents at some point. The difference was this was in Mexico, at night, in the state with the highest per capita rate of kidnapping. We were in a church yard watching hundreds participate in a beautiful silent, candle-lit procession when my six-year-old daughter's hand slipped from her father's. "Oh, yes, we saw a little girl being led away, crying that she didn't want to leave," one woman told my husband, our entire frantic search carried out in whispers. At this point, my future life flashed before my eyes: a child whose parents have died is an orphan but what would I become without my daughter?

Eventually, a priest on a make-shift stage broke the hush by announcing into the microphone, “if anyone finds a little girl named Amaya, please bring her to the stage. Her parents are looking for her.” After fifteen minutes, our daughter appeared, and we ran to the stage, overflowing with relief and joy, to hug her. But that’s not the moment that sticks with me most vividly. A few minutes later, a man approached us somewhat tentatively, and said: “I’m the one who found your daughter.” We waited, wondering what he expected from us. “I saw a girl sitting all by herself inside the church. I asked if she was Amaya, and when she said ‘yes,’ I told her to come with me.” Amaya later explained that she had gone inside the church to get us “good seats,” not understanding that the “show” would take place outside.

The man put his hand on my husband’s shoulder and lowered his voice: “My child went missing once, too. The family that located my son asked me a favor. ‘The next time you hear that a child is lost,’ they said, ‘drop whatever you are doing and search for that child—search as if it were your own.’ Now, I am asking you to do the same.”

In CCT, we define compassion as: *an awareness of another's suffering coupled with the willingness to do something to relieve the suffering*. The man who searched for and found my daughter hadn’t just empathized with me, nor had he pitied me, which implies not wanting to ever be in my awful shoes (his child had gone missing, too!). And he showed me much more than kindness: he alleviated my suffering and left me wanting to do the same for others. He met the stress of hearing about a lost child in a way that was good for him—experiencing what researchers call the “warm glow” of compassion satisfaction—and good for me, the traumatized parent. Even though it’s a response to suffering, compassion is a feel-good emotion. That’s why the Dalai Lama says: “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”