

# Compassionate Conversation: Bringing Dignity to our Community

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“Compassion and tolerance are not a sign of weakness,  
but a sign of strength.”

- Dalai Lama

## **Introduction: The Value of Compassion**

Compassion is a concept that is deeply embedded in our human consciousness, in our hearts. It may also prove to be crucial to our well-being in a world now shared by more than seven billion people. Indeed, the capacity for compassion in the human mind and heart, recently a topic of study in the neurosciences and the subject of ongoing discussions in psychology, ethics, literature, and theology, may be key to the very survival of humankind as well as the environment we share with other creatures.

Although we will propose a working definition and discuss practical applications of compassion for our everyday lives. Compassion is recognized as a significant and powerful value in both ancient and modern cultures. It holds exciting potential for humankind to create compassionate communities and, perhaps, a compassionate community in which people take responsibility and care for each other, especially those who are suffering at present, and where peaceful co-existence is a genuine possibility.

## **Definition: The Many Faces of Compassion**

Compassion has many faces, and to define it is not easy. We can consider the meaning and origins of the word “compassion” in various languages. We can read about the concept in discussions of ethics and morality. We can take into account the stories, parables, and theologies of various world religions. And in current scientific journals and academic studies as well as popular magazines, articles, and videos, we can read about compassion in the context of various related qualities and concepts.

## **Scientific Approaches to Compassion**

A relatively recent approach to understanding compassion comes from scientific research and attempts to map the biological basis of compassion, including taking measurements of activity in the vagus nerve, heart rate, the secretion of the “bonding hormone” oxytocin, and activity in various regions of the brain. The Greater Good Science Center, based at the University of California, Berkeley, which studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being, provides a practical definition and one that may be useful for community builders: “Compassion is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering.”

In the same vein, Dan Martin, a professor and researcher in social psychology and business management at California State University, East Bay, proposes that taking action is an essential aspect of compassion. He views compassion as a complex idea that can manifest itself in myriad ways, and poses a three-part definition of compassion to include (1) noticing suffering, (2) feeling empathy, and (3) taking action to guide those suffering toward the ways to tolerate and/or change their thoughts and behaviors.

For the purposes of this discussion, we have combined Martin's definition with that of the Greater Good Science Foundation to provide a practical construct and a good place to begin in considering the importance of compassion in community building: Compassion is a feeling that arises when a person becomes aware of another's suffering, feels empathy for that person, and takes action to believe in that suffering and its amelioration through actions by the suffering person.

## **The Importance of Compassion for Community Building, and Therefore Compassionate Dialogue**

### **The Need for Compassionate Dialogue**

Now, in the early decades of the 21st Century, we are all witness - through the internet, television, radio, and print media if not in actual experience - to the suffering brought about by natural catastrophes and man-made tragedies on an almost daily basis: destructive storms, diseases, acts of political terror, school shootings, soldier suicides, human trafficking, and discrimination and oppression against one or another group of people. We observe or hear about homelessness, hate crimes, too many children living below the poverty level, being traumatized by living in war zones, or living with the systematic messages from the group in power about a group with less power.

Everywhere, every day, we learn of people suffering, in our own communities and in communities throughout the world. It is difficult not to be aware of all of this suffering, yet most of us manage to keep it from the forefront of our everyday lives. The opiate epidemic is a great current example of the deep suffering of our community.

Possibly because the sheer number of issues and the amount of suffering can seem overwhelming, we tend to "cultivate our own gardens" if not actually bury our heads in the sand in an effort to protect ourselves from the "pain." While we often rely on our government or social agencies - local, national, and international - to deal with the many issues that cause people to suffer, it is everywhere evident that something more is needed. In our communities and in the world, we are confronted with an urgent need to listen to and understand each other, to empathize with all of those who suffer, and to act with compassion for the health and well-being of all people. We will explore how we might do this.

### **The Role of Compassion in Community Building**

Community builders will be challenged to both bring awareness and build empathy; but to be successful, they will need to facilitate the design and delivery of compassionate actions among community members. How? Compassion will be a critical element throughout every stage of our organizing process, from assessment and planning through implementation and evaluation. It is our only constant skill.

During initial community assessment, if we do not take the time to really listen deeply with empathy and

the state of compassion - to those who are affected by a life challenge, we risk misunderstanding what the real issues are and what is needed to resolve those issues. A person who experiences domestic violence, for example, may benefit from the opportunity to go to a safe house with their children rather than the more usual “solution” of having their partner arrested and their children removed from the home. Successful solutions cannot be imposed; they must be developed with understanding, empathy, and compassion for those who are suffering. People change when they have power over their own lives.

The implementation of any plan to relieve suffering also calls for focused empathy and compassionate action. An attitude of compassion and kindness helps ensure that we do not impose a top-down solution on those who are suffering - the homeless, the unemployed, minority youth, the mentally ill, the hungry - rather, we need to take the time to walk in their story, to listen deeply, to understand. Compassionate dialogue within a community takes time - to recognize the suffering, to truly empathize with those who suffer, and then to take compassionate action that will improve their situation. We need to involve those who are or have been suffering as the experts in the solution: they are the experts.

### **Favorable Conditions for the Use of Compassion**

When is it most appropriate or helpful to be compassionate? The very question may seem a bit strange, for we might well ask when is it not appropriate or helpful to act compassionately. Yet some situations so obviously call for compassion that we may not even be conscious of making a choice to take compassionate action - such as when a family member asks for help or just a listening ear, when a co-worker makes an error and faces ridicule or worse, when a neighbor has suffered a loss of property or a loved one. These seem obvious. Because they inhabit our personal sphere, we find it relatively easy to empathize with them, to feel their pain and want to help - to be a compassionate witness. These situations are difficult not to try to “fix” by giving unsolicited advice and feedback.

What about suffering outside our personal sphere? For many of us, seeing a child or an animal in distress will trigger our empathy and compassion even if we have no previous relationship with them. Similarly, if we notice someone who is relatively helpless - the elderly, the injured - and in obvious physical distress, we are moved to compassionate action - to provide assistance or comfort, or to call for help. However, at some point, it becomes more difficult to jolt our awareness, our empathy, and certainly our compassionate action, to reach beyond our comfort zone, to risk, to be courageous.

When and how do we recognize the suffering and extend our compassion to that ragged-looking homeless man or that “bag lady” pushing an overloaded cart down the street? When do we inquire into what services are available to the frail elderly, to the developmentally challenged, to the opiate misusers with their compulsion to alleviate their “pain,” to the mentally ill and their families? When will we go beyond inquiry, and advocate for those services? What moves us to recognize and do something about people who suffer from poverty and hunger in our own communities or in communities far away? What can motivate us to reach out to relieve the suffering of people, perhaps immigrants who live amongst us, whose beliefs and cultures are so different from our own?

We struggle with how much we are willing to empathize, and then make a conscious choice to give of

our time, energy, and wealth to improve life for others in our community who suffer in this moment.

## **How to Use Compassion in Community Building**

Let's remind ourselves here of our definition of compassion as an asset for community building: Compassion is a feeling that arises when a person becomes aware of another's suffering, feels empathy for that person, and takes action to change the community conditions that promote the suffering. The challenges for community development then are how to (1) build awareness, (2) encourage the development of empathy for those who are suffering (with opiate misuse among others), and (3) help move the community to compassionate action. We will consider each of these challenges in turn.

### **Building Awareness**

We have all witnessed the outpouring of support that occurs when there is a particularly memorable or well-publicized catastrophe, whether it is a natural disaster or a heinous crime committed against some portion of humanity. We understand that the suffering of other beings can touch the hearts and minds of many people, even those who live thousands of miles away from the disasters. Do we need to wait for the occurrence of a disaster to ignite compassion within our communities? Is it enough that we have lost 418 people in the State of Maine in the past year, 119 per day in the country as a whole. ENOUGH!

The immediate challenge in community activism is how to get people to pay attention to what is happening every day closer to home, in their own backyards. The pain and suffering that goes mostly unnoticed by many of us does not melt away, we just choose not to see it. On the contrary, eventually the pain and suffering of an affected group - a marginalized ethnic population, minority youth, opiate misusers, homeless veterans, the mentally ill - will spill over into the wider community, often with tragic consequences. So creating awareness is an essential first step in using compassion for community activism. How do we do it?

### **Many Voices and Perspectives**

One of the major strategies in any community activism effort is to engage as inclusive a group as possible - especially those directly affected by this issue - to gain the perspective and support of the various groups and individuals that make up the community. It is not a simple task to bring together disparate (and sometimes hostile) groups in an open discussion and to expose and explore their pain and suffering. Well-meaning community organizers may find that uninvited and negative guests - anger, misunderstanding, ignorance, apathy, prejudice, privilege, miscommunication, fear, and selfishness - may arrive at a meeting to disrupt our efforts.

At such moments, compassion is needed more than ever by the community activists, for compassionate listening and understanding of the stories behind all of these emotions and ideas can lead to greater empathy and compassion for all involved. Compassion can bring about radical change in a community when we weave a community of inclusion. We need to invite in those who disagree to "lean in" to the opposing views.

## **Conduct Surveys and Assessments**

Many approaches and tools are available to help bring about greater awareness and to facilitate an inclusive community discussion and assessment to identify the needs within the community, and its own solutions for dealing with the suffering. In some situations, a door-to-door campaign may be most effective. In others, a facilitated, empathetic discussion may be helpful. An additional possibility for building awareness is the use of an assessment that can provide a snapshot of the community's status on this issue as it relates to the "health" of the community.

## **Read, Celebrate, and Work Together**

The development of empathy in individuals may also be related to what they read, observe, think, and experience. The broader our experience and knowledge of other people, the more likely we are to develop empathy for others. We need to meet the "other" in our community, to share their common humanity, and empathize with their situation. Opportunities to share the other's cultures and their daily routines can encourage and increase empathy within the community. Dramatic presentations and storytelling can also serve to promote understanding and empathy.

Listening to the stories and diverse perspectives around people's lives and planning a project to help build empathy.

## **Appeal to Values**

Empathy may also develop out of deeply held spiritual values, ethical and moral principles, gratitude accompanied by a desire to "give back," political and economic ideals, and concern for neighbors and friends. An appeal to these values - in faith communities, in political speeches, in letters to the editor of the local paper, in radio announcements, on billboards, and in public lectures, films, and discussions - may encourage the development of empathy necessary to accomplish our work of community. Activism to change the conditions that promote "Shame".

## **Moving to Compassionate Action**

Scientific inquiry and research has demonstrated that performing or even just observing acts of compassion (or kindness or niceness - also referred to as "pro-social acts") - can be as contagious as a biological virus. Being infected by experiencing or observing such acts can cause "elevation," a joyous lifting of one's heart and mind. To put it more clinically, we experience an emotional response to witnessing others' acts, which make us feel unselfish, often with a desire to act similarly.

You can try out the idea of elevation for yourself by watching a [short video](#) about a boy who has no coat and is shivering in the cold at a bus stop in Norway. How can we reach people within our own communities? What will move the community beyond recognizing and empathizing to taking action?

## **Contagion of Compassionate Action**

One hopeful approach stems from research that demonstrates the contagion of compassionate actions. A

research study conducted by James Fowler, associate professor in political science at UC San Diego and Nicholas Christakis, professor of sociology, medicine, and medical sociology at Harvard, provided the first laboratory evidence that cooperative behavior is contagious and that it spreads from person to person to person. They demonstrated that when people benefit from kindness they “pay it forward” by helping others who were not originally involved, creating a cascade of cooperation that influences dozens more in a social network.

### **Paying It Forward**

The research around elevation and the potential to create a chain-reaction of compassion provides hope for the idea that in our community (and perhaps in the global community) we can unleash a revolution of compassion by “paying it forward,” committing to act with compassion for anyone we happen to interact with throughout the day. To bring dignity to every interaction with opiate users.

Each of our compassionate acts can result in more compassionate actions, thus reaching beyond the initial action. This is our way of ending the daily death toll of opiate misusers in Maine, and the benefits this can have for individuals, for health, and for social well-being of our community.

### **The Sum is Greater Than Its Parts**

In their book *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, renowned scientists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler use the metaphor of the “bucket brigade” to emphasize the increased effectiveness of people working in connected networks as opposed to the same number of people working as individuals. For example, if a house is burning and a hundred people (who happen to have buckets) carry buckets back and forth from a river to douse the fire, they will be ten times less effective in putting out the fire than a line of people passing buckets of water from the river to the fire. The immense power of social networks is one that we, as community activists need to harness.

While individual acts of compassion are to be encouraged, often they may not be enough to influence long-standing, entrenched, and emotionally laden conditions within a community - gang violence, the opioid epidemic, domestic violence, police brutality, homelessness, racial injustice, chronic hunger, poverty, and prejudice against immigrants. Even those of us who feel great compassion around these issues may feel powerless and perhaps hopeless in trying to resolve them on an individual basis. It is in our collective effort.

Once we are able to tap into our capacity for compassion and join our efforts with those of others who feel the same - a kind of bucket brigade - we are better equipped to seek ways to relieve the pain and suffering that we may have pushed aside and tried to ignore. Together, the possibility for increasing compassion within our community grows exponentially. At the same time, our compassionate activism has a positive influence on others, not unlike the spread within social media of “viral videos” that depict particularly tender, comic, or heroic moments in the lives of people.

### **Developing and Promoting Compassion**

It is certainly true that people within every faith tradition and in every nation across the Earth yearn for a more compassionate and peaceful world in which all people - and the Earth itself - can experience less suffering and greater well-being for themselves, their families, their communities, and their environment. How can we inspire more people to understand the urgency of joining together with compassion, to take responsibility and to care for another, especially now during this epidemic?

Recent developments in positive psychology, emotional intelligence, motivational interviewing, meditation practices, and mindfulness training all hold out hope that we humans can teach and learn the spirit and skills that will help us extend the hands of compassion.

### **Teach and Learn Compassion**

Scientific research into the measurable benefits of compassion indicates that individuals can benefit personally by learning to be more compassionate. Compassion training programs for adults are underway at several institutions including Stanford University, Emory University, and the University of California, Berkeley. While findings are still preliminary, the research suggests that compassion can be learned, that formal training can help, and also that being compassionate can improve health, well-being, and the quality of relationships.

### **Gain Emotional Intelligence Skills**

The skills that contribute to the various components of emotional intelligence (often called EI or EQ) - self-awareness, self-management, awareness of and interaction with others, and resilience - can provide an excellent foundation for community activists in their work to bring awareness, build empathy, and move people to compassionate action within their communities. Motivational interviewing and emotional intelligence may be viewed as prerequisites to the development of compassion.

One of the foundational aspects of emotional intelligence and motivational interviewing for example, is mindful self-awareness, which includes “emotional literacy,” the ability to identify your feelings and emotions in a given moment so that you can then learn how to manage them. Emotional literacy, like the spirit and skills of motivational interviewing and emotional intelligence, can be taught and learned. Empathy - the ability to recognize and identify with the values and emotions of others - is another significant aspect of emotional intelligence and motivational interviewing training. A well-developed sense of empathy, or “emotional resonance” with another paves the way for the development of satisfying and productive relationships. It can also result in a greater understanding and a more compassionate view of all beings and their suffering, especially opiate users.



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He is the co-founder of *Agape Inc.* which supports the Men's Resource Center of Southern Maine whose mission is to support boys, men and fathers and oppose violence and Dignity for Opiate users , a radical movement to change the conditions that promote the opiate epidemic in our communities.

Stephen is a member of the International Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) since 2003. He is a MIA-STEP trainer (Motivational Interviewing Assessment; Supervisor Training Program) for the New England ATTC since 2007. Stephen has been Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity trained and has over 100 hours of training in Motivational Interviewing. Stephen provides coaching and training domestically and internationally (Singapore, Iceland, China, Canada, Holland, Sweden, Poland, Turkey & UK) for social service agencies, health-care providers, substance abuse counselors, recovery coach specialist, criminal justice, vocational rehabilitation and other groups on motivational interviewing, addiction, co-occurring disorders, counseling theory, "challenging" adolescents, supervision and ethics for care professionals, men's work and the power of group work, as well as supervising a coding/coaching laboratory and simulation lab and training for Motivational Interviewing.

Stephen is the proud father of an 20 year-old son Sebastian, and co-author of *Game Plan: A Man's Guide to Achieving Emotional Fitness*.