

The mental health impacts of compassion

It has been called the secret to well-being.¹ It's considered one of the most powerful agents for health.² It releases the “love hormone” into our blood, giving us a rush of pleasure.³

What is it? It might surprise you that the answer is compassion.

Compassion is the strong emotion that moves us to take action to reduce suffering. The Dalai Lama, an expert on compassion, defines it as “a sensitivity to suffering in self and others, with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it.”⁴

Although the philosophy of compassion dates from ancient times, interest in investigating compassion has surged in the last fifteen years. This is in part thanks to the mental health benefits it offers. Compelling scientific evidence suggests that giving compassion, receiving compassion, and allowing ourselves to experience self-compassion are all very beneficial to our mental health.

Giving compassion

Showing compassion to others is particularly powerful for our mental health and well-being.



EASING DEPRESSION

When we show compassion through caring, and by expressing feelings of kindness, it can have a positive impact on our “mood.” Mood here is what doctors call the emotional state that colours how we perceive the world. A positive effect our mood means, for instance, that compassion can help lift feelings of depression.⁵



A SPIKE IN HAPPINESS

According to researchers, it feels as good to give compassion as to receive it. The act of “giving compassion” is closely connected to the release of oxytocin, a feel-good hormone. Giving appears to be equally if not more pleasurable than receiving.⁶



A CASCADE OF KINDNESS

A domino effect can also happen when we help others, because witnessing acts of compassion can encourage others to show compassion too. This suggests that compassion is contagious.⁷



A CATALYST FOR OPTIMISM

Giving compassion to others can shift the way we think, making us more positive about things around us.⁸



SELFLESS SATISFACTION

One study showed that spending money on other people may have a more positive impact on happiness than spending money on ourselves. In fact, the greater the gift, the greater the emotional payback.⁹ This is true for gifts to charities and other causes, and as well as for other non-monetary giving, such as volunteering.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-mental-health/202310/is-compassion-the-secret-to-well-being>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/from-striving-to-thriving/202304/what-are-the-benefits-of-compassion>

³ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/compassionate_mind_healthy_body

⁴ The Dalai Lama (2001). *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*. Little Brown & Company: Boston, MA.

⁵ Leaviss J, Uttley L. Psychotherapeutic benefits of compassion-focused therapy: an early systematic review. *Psychological Medicine*. 2015;45(5):927-945. doi:10.1017/S0033291714002141

⁶ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/compassionate_mind_healthy_body

⁷ <https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/well-being/compassion-benefits/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Elizabeth W. Dunn et al, Spending Money on Others Promotes Happiness. *Science* 319, 1687-1688 (2008). DOI:10.1126/science.1150952

Getting Compassion



CALMING EFFECTS

One theory¹⁰ suggests that when we receive compassion from others, it may help learn to soothe and comfort ourselves when we are facing difficulties. It also helps us regulate distress.¹¹



BRAIN-BASED BENEFITS

Giving or receiving compassion can release oxytocin, a feel-good hormone, and can activate pleasure centres in the brain. This adds to feelings of trust and connection and helps us bond with others.

Self-compassion

Perhaps the most compelling discoveries of all are the mental health benefits related to self-compassion. Dr. Kristin Neff and colleagues, leading experts on self-compassion, describe it as “treating oneself with the same kindness, care, and concern that one would offer to a close friend.”¹² The positive impacts have been shown in many different groups, including people with mental illnesses,¹³ mental health professionals¹⁴ and university students.¹⁵



GIVING OURSELVES A BREAK

When we respond with kindness to our personal shortcomings and failures, rather than with self-critique, we can be more self-accepting. This promotes positive self-esteem and well-being.



BOUNCING BACK

Self-compassion improves emotional resilience. When we are compassionate with ourselves, we are better equipped to cope with setbacks and failure.



EMBRACING SELF

Practicing self-compassion allows us to have better relationships with ourselves. We have fewer negative self-judgments and more encouraging and caring self-talk.



REDUCING SYMPTOMS

Research shows that self-compassion affects the severity of some mental health symptoms and improves quality of life. A new form of psychotherapy called Compassion-focused therapy (CFT) shows promising results for people with mental illnesses who experience a lot of shame and self-criticism, including depression and bipolar disorder. This therapy reduces depression, anxiety, anger, and loneliness.



HAPPINESS FACTOR

Self-compassion has also been linked to happiness, optimism, positive mood and to a greater sense of meaning and fulfillment.

¹⁰ Gilbert, P. (2009). The compassionate mind: A new approach to the challenge of life. Constable and Robinson.

¹¹ Jinpa T. (2015). A fearless heart: How the courage to be compassionate can transform our lives. New York, NY: Avery.

¹² Neff, K.D., Dahm, K.A. (2015). Self-Compassion: What It Is, What It Does, and How It Relates to Mindfulness. In: Ostafin, B., Robinson, M., Meier, B. (eds) Handbook of Mindfulness and Self-Regulation. Springer, New York, NY. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-2263-5_10

¹³ Leaviss 2015

¹⁴ Bluth K, Neff KD. New frontiers in understanding the benefits of self-compassion. *Self Identity*. 2018;17(6):605–608. doi: 10.1080/15298868.2018.1508494

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¹⁵ Chan KKS, Lee JC, Yu EKW, Chan AWY, Leung ANM, Cheung RYM, Li CW, Kong RH, Chen J, Wan SLY, Tang CHY, Yum YN, Jiang D, Wang L, Tse CY. The Impact of Compassion from Others and Self-compassion on Psychological Distress, Flourishing, and Meaning in Life Among University Students. *Mindfulness (N Y)*. 2022;13(6):1490–1498. doi: 10.1007/s12671-022-01891-x.