

What is compassion?

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion. - Dalai Lama

The word compassion is derived from Latin, meaning “to suffer together.” Researchers today define compassion as an emotional response to the struggles of others combined with a real, authentic desire to help lessen their suffering.¹ Compassion is often confused with empathy; but while empathy is the sensing, feeling and understanding of another’s suffering, compassion goes beyond empathy, into the realm of taking action. This formula captures what compassion is: empathy + action = compassion.

To be genuine, compassionate acts cannot be motivated by selfish or strategic reasons. We can’t be seeking something out of self-interest, like praise or reward. It is only when compassion is authentic that it is truly beneficial, both to the person giving it and the person receiving it. For more on the benefits of compassion, see “The mental health benefits of compassion.”

Dr. Paul Gilbert² has identified three types of compassion, or “flows”:

- 1 Giving compassion: offering care and support to others who are suffering;**
- 2 Receiving compassion: taking in external care and support when we are suffering;**
- 3 Self-compassion: engaging in self-compassion and self-care when we are suffering ourselves**



WHY DO WE FEEL COMPASSION?

The term “human nature” is often used as a short-cut to describe what is negative and pessimistic about us as human beings – for instance, that we are a selfish and self-serving species. However, the truth about human nature is that we are basically **good**.³ In fact, we have a built-in system for being kind and taking care of others. Compassion is wired into our brains and our biology, and is at the core to our understanding of ethics.



BIOLOGICAL BASIS OF COMPASSION

We are physiologically constructed to be kind. Many studies have shown that human beings are built to respond to others who are in need. Researchers Rilling and Berns studied the brains of participants who were given the chance to help someone.⁴ They discovered that relieving suffering in others gives us the same positive jolt that we get from pleasure. This suggests that compassion is part of our wiring. But it doesn’t stop with the brain. Feeling compassion also has a significant impact on the body. So, for instance, when we feel compassion, our heart rate comes down, and we move into a “soothing mode.” We also release oxytocin, a feel-good hormone.⁵



EVOLUTIONARY ROOTS OF COMPASSION

We may just have a “compassionate instinct,” a natural and automatic response that has helped us survive – and thrive – as a species. Compassion and altruism – the selfless care for others’ well-being – have also played important roles in the evolution of human societies.⁶



ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS ROOTS

Compassion is at the root of most of the world’s major religions and is part of the value system of most human societies.

Buddhism:

Compassion is “**karuna**”
(in Sanskrit)

Judaism:

compassion is known as “**rachamim**”
(in Hebrew)

Islam:

Compassion is known as “**rahma**”
(in Arabic)

Hinduism:

Compassion is, known as “**daya**”
(in Sanskrit)

Confucianism:

Compassion is “**ren**”
(in Chinese)

Christianity:

Jesus’s teachings are founded
in compassion.

The next time you encounter the belief that some human failing is “just human nature,” remember that we are a species that is wired for goodness. Compassion is baked in. Read more about how compassion can be used not only to bring peace of mind, but also peace to the world, here.

¹ Goetz J. L., Keltner D., Simon-Thomas E. (2010). Compassion: An evolutionary analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136, 351-374.

² Gilbert, Paul. *The Compassionate Mind : a New Approach to Life’s Challenges*. London: Constable, 2010.

³ Keltner D, Marsh J, Smith JA, editors. *The compassionate instinct: The science of human goodness*. WW Norton & Company; 2010 Jan 4.

⁴ Rilling, James K. et al. A Neural Basis for Social Cooperation. *Neuron*, Volume 35, Issue 2, 395 - 405

⁵ Keltner D, Marsh J, Smith JA, editors. *The compassionate instinct: The science of human goodness*. WW Norton & Company; 2010 Jan 4.

⁶ Keltner D. *Born to be good: The science of a meaningful life*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company; 2009.