Empathy and Compassion

How Can Understanding the Difference Between Empathy and Compassion Help Preserve Our Emotional Ability to Care for Others?

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Why I am interested

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  - Hospice social worker for 8 years
  - Palliative social worker for 4 years
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- People often say, “How do you do that?” I have wondered the same thing myself.
  - The dichotomy of the work we do.
  - The desire to gain insight from our work.

- I want to sustain the ability to do this work.

- I want to be healthy – for myself and because that will mean better care of others.

- The benefit and the “burden” of this work. Or as we talk, we will ask: Is it a burden?

- I am not an expert ... I am on a journey.
Definitions

- **Compassion**
  - [Simple] A feeling of wanting to help someone who is sick, hungry, in trouble, etc.... (Merriam-Webster)
  - [Full] Sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it. (Merriam-Webster)
  - A feeling of sympathy for someone who is in a bad situation because you understand and care about them. (Macmillan)

- **Empathy**
  - [Simple] The feeling that you understand and share another person’s experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else’s feelings. (Merriam-Webster)
  - [Full] The imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it. (Merriam-Webster)
  - The ability to understand how someone feels because you can imagine what it is like to be them. (Macmillan)
Differential pattern of functional brain plasticity after compassion and empathy training (Klimecki et al.)

- This article examines the idea that when exposed to others’ suffering and an intense sharing of their pain, there can be an increase in empathic distress and decrease helping behavior. (Remember my reasoning?)

- Their aim was “to determine whether training empathy and compassion will have distinct effects on neural function and whether training compassion can help overcome excessive levels of distress.”

- Klimecki et al. conducted empathy training and subsequently compassion training with an active control group. The participants watched videos of people suffering while functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) measures were acquired. A memory training group was used as comparison.
  - Compassion training: They used a contemplative technique from secular compassion training programs that aimed at cultivating feelings of benevolence and friendliness in a state of quiet concentration.
  - Empathy training: They focused on resonating with the suffering.
  - Compassion and empathy training: They were didactic and instructional.
Findings from the article

Empathy

- Empathy training, when compared to the memory training, increased negative effect and brain activations in anterior insula and anterior midcingulate cortex (previously associated area with empathy for pain).
- Empathy training increased self-experienced pain and negative effect in general.

Compassion

- Compassion training increased activations in a non-overlapping brain network spanning ventral striatum, pregenual anterior cingulate cortex and medial orbitofrontal cortex (reward area).
- Compassion training counteracted this effect. It increased positive effect and decreased negative effect.
- Compassion training reversed the effects of empathy by strengthening positive effect and activation in networks associated to affiliation and reward.

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Given this information, how can we increase our compassion?
Compassion practice or trainings

Large and small ways to increase one’s compassion

- Metta or loving-kindness meditation practice
  - According to Lori Chandler in her article, “The Difference Between Empathy and Compassion Is Everything,” she indicates the following benefits of metta practice have been proven: increased life satisfaction, reduced depressive symptoms, decrease in bias toward others, decrease in migraines and emotional tension, and increase in gray matter in our brains.

- The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford School of Medicine
  - 8-week Compassion Cultivation Training educational program designed to help improve your resilience and feel more connected to others. “Learn how to train your mind to intentionally choose compassionate thoughts and actions and develop skills that help you relate to others and yourself.”

- Emory-Tibet Partnership at Emory University
  - Cognitively Based Compassion Training (CBCT) is a training that deliberately and systematically works to cultivate compassion.

- UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness
  - Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) is an 8-week program designed to develop the qualities of compassion, empathy and kindness for oneself and for others.

- The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare
  - Compassionate, Collaborative Care series
Or maybe just understanding our brains a little better can be beneficial?

An example where this information was professionally beneficial to me.

JO – 43 y/o, metastatic colon ca, 2 young girls, psychosocially complex, multiple admissions
Learning about “empathy fatigue” | from Matthieu Ricard’s blog

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References


Thank you.

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