



Empathy & Compassion - inquiry -

Prepared by Root Cuthbertson 2020

This guide is intended as a starting point for conversations, to increase understanding for those who may have a different relationship with these topics than you do. The approaches mentioned in this guide can be part of an Inner Transition toward an understanding of human experience that will ideally foster deeper and more compassionate connections, for individuals, groups, and the entire world.

“Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.” – Leonard Cohen

“We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit.” – Audre Lorde

Why are Empathy and Compassion Important?

Empathy and compassion affect resilience. Ideally an Inner Transition will involve increasing resilience in the face of disturbances and uncertainties, including what Henry Emmons calls '**cultivating a heart capable of love**'. Cultivating a loving and compassionate heart is a common and important challenge for most people, often linked to emotional maturity. Individuals and groups can learn to cope with adversity and respond to differences in ways that facilitate integrity and harmony, deepening and strengthening relationships, leading to breakthroughs rather than breakdowns.

Empathy, compassion, and emotional maturity are important for:

- preventing burnout
- tolerating, accepting, and respecting differences
- recovering from failure
- forgiving easily
- navigating conflicts
- generosity & gratitude
- building trust
- feeling love, connection, and creativity

Cultivating compassion has physiological benefits, according to Carolyn Baker: “People who consciously practice compassion produce higher levels of the anti-stress hormone DHEA and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Overwhelmingly, people who practice compassion report that they feel happier and more at peace.”

Buddhist Ideals

The Buddhist tradition offers some insights. Compassion for self and others is one of four virtuous mental states recommended by the Buddha, along with loving-kindness, equanimity, and sympathetic joy. Compassion (karuna) is the impulse to reduce the harm and suffering of self and others, while loving-kindness (metta) is the impulse to increase the well-being and happiness of self and others. Cruelty is the far opposite of compassion, and pity is its near opposite, superficially resembling it but, in fact, subtly in opposition due to selfish attachment.

Equanimity (upekkha) can be interpreted as emotional maturity, the ideal outgrowth of Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence (see [Guide to Emotions](#)). This involves self-awareness, controlling emotional reactions, reflecting before responding, empathy based on self-awareness, and social skill in navigating emotional conflicts. Emotional maturity is an ideal that can take years to achieve and attention to maintain. And even 'mature' individuals can slip into habitual or 'immature' behaviour patterns.

Sympathetic joy (mudita) can be interpreted as feeling joy for others as much as for oneself. Joy is a vibration that can spread, like attuned strings on a musical instrument that vibrate sympathetically. It is linked to a sense of abundance and generosity: there is plenty of joy to share, and it benefits one and all. With abundance comes gratitude, an appreciation for bounty, blessings, and well-being.

Sympathy

Sympathy, related to pity, derives from the Greek words for **'feeling with'**, implying separation. It is mild care for what another person is experiencing, without really understanding it; superficially soothing from a distance, without any impulse to address the other person's problem. Researcher Brené Brown has said sympathy 'drives disconnection,' and 'gets in the way of empathy.'

Empathy

Brown goes on to say that **'empathy fuels connection'**. Empathy derives from the Greek words for 'feeling inside,' implying blending. It is demonstrating an embodied understanding of what someone is experiencing, which can be supportive in and of itself. Empathy helps another person feel they are not alone with their emotions; that their emotions are real, valid, and understandable.

Theresa Wiseman lists four attributes of empathy:

- to be able to see the world as another person sees it
- to be non-judgmental
- to understand another person's emotions
- to communicate your understanding of that person's emotions

Recent studies of infants and their mothers show that empathy may be an innate part of how humans connect with each other. Most people begin life with a natural ability to feel empathy for others, to varying degrees. Some people are more empathetic than others. Some people may express empathy often without even being aware of it.

It can be helpful to learn to recognise when one is being more or less empathetic. Like strengthening a muscle with exercise, most people can cultivate their empathy and increase it.

Ideally, empathy can be nurtured from a young age, and continue to be present and strong throughout a lifetime. Someone's life experiences, however, can have a dramatic impact on how much they are in touch with their empathy. If empathy is not nurtured or role-modeled, then the empathy 'muscle' can weaken. It may take some effort to re-strengthen empathy and 'get it back,' if the 'muscle' has become very weak.

Brené Brown describes empathy as a skill. She believes that, with practice, mutually meaningful relationships can develop from giving and receiving empathetic support. Empathy is cultivated by courage, compassion, and connection, and is a powerful antidote to shame, which can result in fear, blame of self or others, and disconnection. Brown describes empathy and shame as opposite ends of a continuum. In 2006 she developed Shame Resilience Theory (SRT), asserting that the most isolating experiences are also the most universal. When individuals recognize that they are not defective, or alone in their experiences, they normalize what had previously caused them shame.

“Shame is the intensely painful feeling or belief that we are flawed and unworthy – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do, makes us unworthy of love, acceptance, belonging, or connection. If others see or know it, we have fear of disconnection. It is related to perfectionism - 'if I do it perfectly, then I will be accepted and loved.' “ – Brené Brown

Expressing Empathy

Ideally, an Inner Transition will involve learning how to express empathy – exercising the 'muscles' needed, and practicing to become better at it. Brené Brown, and others, aim to Transition from a 'culture of shame' toward a 'culture of empathy,' where expressing empathy is much more common. (see [Guide to Culture Change](#)). This is relevant for cultures where expressing empathy has been uncommon (see below).

Too much empathy can also be problematic. Empathy can be an embodied experience where an individual feels another person's emotions – e.g. butterflies in the stomach, tension in the neck, a rapid heartbeat. For beginners, this can be strange; and challenging to discern one's own emotions from another's. Ideally, beginners can avoid over-identification with another's emotions (see below), which can lead to confusion and inappropriate reactions.

As individuals get better at identifying emotions and expressing empathy, they can respond rather than react to another's emotions (see [Emotions Guide](#)). A mature empathic response is ideally attuned to another's experience while being respectful, appropriate, and supportive of everyone's well-being.

As with any Inner Transition, expressing empathy can take some getting used to. Try to have patience with yourself and others who may be struggling to express empathy. Offer opportunities to try again, and forgive each other easily.

Not Expressing Empathy & Compassion

There are many reasons why someone may struggle to express empathy or compassion. Typically, these are based on a personal history where empathy and compassion were not encouraged, resulting in beliefs like:

- people in general do not deserve or need empathy & compassion, so neither does any specific individual.
- there will be bad consequences for expressing empathy.
- lack of empathy or compassion is somehow valuable or praiseworthy. (e.g. an identity as a victim or a persecutor)
- relationships based on empathy or compassion are somehow wrong or unimportant.
- empathy and compassion involve transactions that are too expensive.
- due to culture or context, expressing empathy or compassion would feel shameful or wrong.
- expressing empathy or compassion is either wrong or best kept to a minimum.

Barriers to Empathy & Compassion

Emotional immaturity. An individual may avoid feeling their own or others' vulnerability, anger, or pain; or try to reduce relationships which involve pain to brief experiences.

Fear of failure. An individual may believe they are bad at expressing empathy or compassion; that they have 'weak muscles.' Bad consequences may result from expressing empathy in the wrong way.

Compassion fatigue. An individual may feel that their scarce supply has been overwhelmed by too many others who need compassion. This is common for people who care about multiple causes.

Lack of support. An individual may benefit from receiving empathy or compassion rather than giving it. Their capacity to express empathy will be reduced until they receive support.

Internalised messages. An individual's beliefs may be based on messages received from their wider culture or context. These can be either non-verbal or verbal phrases, applying to themselves or to others, that are typically repeated until they acquire meaning.

Negative self-talk. An individual's beliefs may include self-criticism, self-judgment, low self-esteem, or lack of self-respect. (see Intro to Negative Self-Talk + Resources)

Blaming or shaming. An individual's behaviours may include bullying, intimidating, or humiliating others. This can be related to self-image, identity, and self-respect. Brené Brown says, "Blame is a way to discharge pain and discomfort. Blaming is corrosive in relationships, and a missed opportunity for empathy. Instead of truly listening, blaming is about determining who's fault something was."

Numbing or dissociation. An individual may be disconnected from the present, lacking awareness of their own emotions and those of others, which makes it difficult to express empathy. They may even push others away.

Coping strategies. An individual may have developed ways of navigating their life to protect themselves from feeling difficult emotions. Common coping strategies include:

- numbing or dissociation
- over-intellectualising
- seeking approval
- self-sacrifice
- using humour to diffuse tension
- avoiding or seeking attention
- avoiding perceived risks
- avoiding confrontation or conflict

Self-Compassion

(Kristin Neff)

Psychologist Kristin Neff lists the benefits of self-compassion as:

- greater emotional resilience
- more accurate self-image
- more caring relationships
- less narcissism
- less reactive anger.

Neff states that compassion involves opening the heart to being human, instead of fighting against it; having more compassion for oneself and for others who are having a similar experience. Compassion for others involves:

- noticing that someone is experiencing pain and suffering.
- responding in your heart to their pain and suffering; desiring to help them in some way.
- offering empathy, understanding, and kindness when someone fails or makes mistakes, instead of criticising or judging them.
- in contrast with pity, approaching with an attitude that suffering, failure, and imperfection are part of a shared human condition.

An individual practicing self-compassion acts the same way toward themselves when they experience failure, rejection, or disgust at themselves. Instead of ignoring their pain, they pause to give themselves empathy ('this is really difficult right now'), and look for ways to soothe or comfort themselves.

Three Elements of Self-Compassion

(Kristin Neff)

Kindness vs. judgment

All humans experience frustration, loss, and limitations; make mistakes and fall short of their ideals. Rather than ignoring pain or judging personal shortcomings, instead try offering kindness. People cannot always be, or get, exactly what they want. Those who deny this fact run the risk of increasing stress, frustration, and self-criticism. Those who accept this fact with empathy and kindness can grow toward emotional maturity.

Common humanity vs. isolation

Part of the common human condition is being fallible, vulnerable, imperfect, and experiencing suffering. Not having things exactly perfect can feel so frustrating and isolating, that an individual may forget they are interconnected with others. Suffering and feeling inadequate are common experiences, not something that happens to one person alone. When shared, one person's experience of suffering can increase empathy for others who also have a similar experience.

Mindfulness vs. over-identification

Self-compassion aims to mindfully embrace uncomfortable emotions, so they are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. Non-judgmental mindfulness involves observing thoughts and emotions as they are, without trying to suppress or ignore them. Mindfulness is not the same as 'over-identifying' with temporary thoughts and emotions. Identity need not be based on judgments, assumptions, fear, and anger. Identity can be large enough to include these things, and also include compassion.

Three Things Self-Compassion is Not

(Kristin Neff)

Self-pity

Self-pity narrows perspective, exaggerates separation, over-focuses on individual suffering, over-identifies with personal emotional drama, and forgets that others have similar problems. In contrast, self-compassion reduces isolation and disconnection, relating an individual's experience to others' by providing a wider perspective and context.

Self-indulgence

To be happy and healthy in the long term, self-care can sometimes feel unpleasant – like quitting smoking, losing weight, or maintaining a physical exercise routine (see separate guides to Self-Care). Indulging in too much short-term pleasure can be harmful to well-being, and rarely leads to an Inner Transition, personal growth, or transformation. In contrast, self-compassion provides a powerful motivating force for growth and transformation.

Self-esteem

Low self-esteem is problematic and can lead to depression. An over-focus on high self-esteem, based on evaluation of being 'special' or 'better than' others, can also be problematic. It can result in narcissism; putting others down; anger and aggression toward others; ignoring, distorting, or hiding personal shortcomings; or an unclear or inaccurate self-image. Self-esteem is thus often dependent on external circumstances, like recent success or failure.

In contrast, self-compassion is for everyone, simply because they are human. Feeling good about oneself is not dependent on evaluation or feeling 'better than' others. Instead of being hidden, personal shortcomings can be acknowledged with kindness, allowing greater clarity of self-image. Self-compassion is not dependent on external circumstances, it's always available – especially after an experience of failure.

Tips for beginners

(Kristin Neff)

- Self-compassion is a practice of goodwill, not good feelings. Though it aims to reduce suffering, it is impossible to control everything. Trying to make pain go away – by suppressing it or fighting it – will likely worsen it. Better to mindfully accept that a moment is painful, and recall that pain is a common part of the human experience. Embrace yourself with kindness, and give yourself support and comfort to bear the pain. Try to remain open to how it may help with growth and transformation.
- For some beginners, their pain actually increases at first. This is like a 'backdraft,' a firefighting term for when a door in a burning house is opened – oxygen goes in, and flames rush out. A similar process can occur when a door to the heart opens – love goes in and old pain can come out. As in the sayings: “When we give ourselves unconditional love, we discover the conditions under which we were unloved;” or “Love reveals everything unlike itself.”
- Meeting old pain with mindfulness and self-compassion, allows the heart to begin to heal. Try allowing the practice of self-compassion to happen slowly.
- Those who feel overwhelmed by difficult emotions may need to pause or retreat temporarily. It may help to focus on the breath, or sensations in the soles of the feet; to practice self-care or self-soothing, like drinking a cup of tea, or stroking something soft. Reinforce the habit of self-compassion by giving yourself what you need in the moment.

“Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me.” – Audre Lorde

Respect for Self and Others

Respect is a learned behaviour, often role-modeled by elders, caregivers, mentors or other role models. Like any learned behaviour, individuals can Transition toward having more respect for self and others.

Self-respect is often an important part of respecting others. Self-respect relates to self-esteem, self-image, self-care, expressing boundaries, and conduct. Being out-of-alignment – when behaviours do not match beliefs – can reduce self-respect and increase negative self-talk. During an Inner Transition, when past behaviours or beliefs may be changing, self-respect may be shaken; and it can strengthen again over time.

Tips for Beginners

(Danielle Dowling)

- **Self-image:** Be honest about who you are, and are not. Accept the realities of the present.
- **Identity:** Focus less on being 'normal,' and more on being yourself.
- **Identity:** Your identity can be determined more by your choices than by your genes or your upbringing.
- **Boundaries:** Learn to define your own boundaries, instead of allowing others to. (see [Respecting 'Yes' & 'No'](#))
- **Boundaries:** Let whatever you get done today be enough. (see [Respecting 'Yes' & 'No'](#))
- **Maturity:** Tolerate those who are different; see if you can come to accept their choices, even if you disagree.
- **Self-Care:** Spend more time with those you respect and who respect you. (see [Self-Care Social](#))
- **Communication:** Learn to apologize with self-respect. Courageously tell the truth, with no excuses. Have accountability without self-judgment, modeling self-compassion.
- **Communication:** Increase your appreciation & gratitude for self and others.

Distinct from evaluation, respect for others is based more on actions than words – what someone actually does instead of what they say they will do. Respect can be earned over time in a progression from tolerance, to acceptance, to respect.

- **Tolerating differences.** 'Don't ask, don't tell.' An important first step, maybe as far as some people are willing or able to go.
- **Accepting differences.** 'Agree to disagree.' Growing understanding and the beginning of empathy.
- **Respecting differences.** 'Live and let live.' Mutual understanding and growing empathy.
- Like trust that's broken, if respect is lost it can take some time to earn back (see [Rupture & Repair](#) below).

Safety & Courage

“When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.” – Audre Lorde

An Inner Transition will likely involve facing uncertainty – making decisions without the certainty of a desirable outcome. This may mean taking risks, and some people are more risk-averse than others. This can be due to a personal history where risky decisions resulted in worsening situations and difficult emotions. Those who have had their heart broken in the past may encounter the risk of it being broken again. A resilient and compassionate heart has the courage to remain open, despite the risk. Life involves a certain amount of taking risks and being broken. Fortunately, what can be broken can often be mended and healed.

It can take courage to risk being broken, vulnerable, or failing. Courage involves feeling the fear present in a risky decision, and attempting something anyway. Not making the attempt can be just as bad, or worse, than taking the risk.

Some people prefer to feel safe before making risky attempts, like sharing their personal emotions, failures, or shortcomings. Some people believe they may never be safe, so they use their courage to make attempts anyway. Safety is a luxury for some, and a perceived necessity for others.

Perceived safety can make it easier to make risky attempts. An individual's perception of safety, often based on their background and personal history, can be another kind of Inner Transition. Many people have sensitivities and preferences around emotional safety due to their upbringing. Some may have resistance to expressing uncomfortable emotions in a group, which may not feel safe or appropriate to them. Others may feel safe expressing their uncomfortable emotions, but only if they feel that others in the group would have compassion for their vulnerability.

Ideally an Inner Transition will balance the polarities of safety and courage. Those who feel the need for safety can grow their courage. And those who are already courageous can find a degree of safety.

“Courage is about speaking your mind with your heart. I believe that what we regret most are our failures of courage, whether it’s the courage to be kinder, to show up, to say how we feel, to set boundaries, to be good to ourselves. That regret can be the birthplace of empathy.” – Brené Brown

Failure & Forgiving: Failing Forward

Resilience and perseverance both rely on being able to recover after a crisis or failure and try again. Failed attempts can be reframed as 'prototypes,' in an entrepreneurial attitude. Most entrepreneurs, who invent something unseen before in the world, fail many times before achieving a desirable outcome. John Maxwell calls this 'failing forward.' This attitude toward failure allows greater freedom to experiment, and to take more risks with unbounded creativity. Some groups celebrate their failures as noble attempts that, while ultimately unsuccessful, nonetheless contributed toward the group's aims.

Transition will probably be a similar process, with plenty of uncertainty and very few patterns or role models as guides. In times of uncertainty and disturbance, failures may become quite common. An Inner Transition will ideally reframe failure as something likely to happen, part of being human, and no big problem. Transitioners will likely benefit from cultivating compassion and expressing empathy for failure, setback, and adversity.

Increasing empathy and compassion for someone (including yourself) who fails when attempting something new can boost self-respect and help them to try again. Over-criticising failure (including harsh self-criticism) can be a path away from resilience toward despair.

Harsh criticism is not the same as constructive feedback, an important process for accountability, respecting boundaries, and well-being. (see [Giving and Receiving Feedback](#)).

Cultivating compassion will ideally lead to forgiving each other easily for failures or shortcomings. Forgiving is an important process that begins with empathy and compassion, developing from the attitude that everyone is imperfectly human, trying their best, and may fail in similar ways. Forgiveness is related to a number of beliefs about self, others, blame, and failure. Forgiveness often involves expressing emotions, rather than suppressing them (see [Inquiry: Emotions](#)). Rather than holding onto a grudge or a limiting belief about oneself or another, forgiving can involve releasing stuck energy and allowing it to flow.

Like empathy, forgiveness is a skill that can be improved with practice. Beginners may find it easier to start with forgiving something small, which can be very easy, and take a short time. Forgiving something large can be more difficult and take longer. It may be easier for some people to forgive others than to forgive themselves, or vice versa. An Inner Transition will ideally lead to a greater willingness and capability to forgive both self and others.

Rupture & Repair

Expressing empathy and cultivating compassion will ideally make it easier for individuals to negotiate conflicts when they arise. Negotiating conflicts is a larger topic covered in a separate Inner Transition guide.

After a conflict between two people, it can feel like trust has been broken, and the relationship has 'ruptured.' In some situations, a period of separation can be helpful. In some cases, the two will need to interact again soon, and would benefit from finding peace with each other. Expressing empathy is a good way to begin re-building trust, and to 'repair' what was broken. Empathy helps each to see from the other's perspective, while also feeling that their own perspective has been understood.

Regardless of how successful the conflict resolution is, the willingness to 'repair a rupture' can be a significant first step. Cultivating compassion provides a good foundation for such willingness. And showing willingness can, in itself, help to repair a relationship and re-build broken trust.

Cultivating Compassion

Compassion does not usually arrive all at once. Like in gardening, it can be cultivated, encouraged to grow a little at a time. Individuals can improve conditions and strengthen the roots of compassion, similar to strengthening the 'muscles' of empathy.

Compassion involves being personally resilient enough to meet someone in their pain, turn towards them, and find ways to support them. Compassion derives from the Latin words for 'suffering together,' implying an attempt to ease a burden by sharing it; and a willingness to be in relationship for some time. While expressing empathy can be short-term, compassionate support often involves a longer-term relationship with another person, their pain, and finding ways to support them. An individual offering compassionate support ideally attunes to another's suffering so as to respond to it in a good way – appropriate to the context of who and how they are; and respecting the boundaries of both giver and receiver.

For example, if my work colleague is ill, I can empathize with them about how awful that can feel, and then compassionately encourage them to stop working, go home, and practice self-care. Before offering to support them by taking on some of their work, I would consider whether or not that supports my own well-being.

Cultivating compassion for oneself and others may include things which at first seem difficult, like conversations or conflicts (see [guide to Conflict](#)) which may feel uncomfortable.

Navigating discomfort is often part of an Inner Transition, and cultivating compassion is about gradually getting better at turning towards discomfort with curiosity, humility, and courage. This can feel especially difficult when:

- another's reality seems alien, or opposite to one's own
- another's expression of beliefs or values feels uncomfortable
- an individual doesn't like another's habits, behaviours, or attitudes.

The habits, behaviours, or attitudes individuals don't like about themselves are often the same ones they don't like about others. Cultivating compassion for one's own shortcomings can grow one's compassion for others'.

All Inner Transitions can benefit from patience, courage, kindness, and forgiving easily. Individuals can strengthen their 'muscles' for turning towards pain or suffering – their own or others' – so that expressing empathy, cultivating compassion, and building trust all become more common.

Vulnerability (building trust)

Vulnerability is another part of the shared common human condition. All humans experience times of feeling fragile, powerless, or in need of support. It can take a lot of courage to trust someone enough to show vulnerability. Paradoxically, practicing vulnerability can be part of an Inner Transition toward emotional maturity, becoming stronger rather than weaker.

Brené Brown sees vulnerability as a path to joy, love, and trust; to finding the way back to connection with each other. Brown describes connection as the energy that is created between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment. Connection depends on allowing oneself to be vulnerably seen.

Courageously sharing vulnerability is one way to build trust between people, which in turn relies on strengthening the 'muscles' of empathy and compassion. This can be like building a bridge – a slender path spanning a divide, creating connection instead of separation. At first, such bridges may be fragile; they can grow stronger over time. Vulnerability can take practice, especially for those from a background where it was not encouraged.

Empathy allows individuals to relate to others' vulnerability. If someone who is feeling vulnerable seeks your support, it can be helpful to notice your reactions and responses. Pause and notice your immediate physical, mental, or emotional reactions. If you can not feel anything, try getting curious about that.

“In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear — fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live... And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength.” – Audre Lorde

Compassion & Culture

All humans experience pain and suffering, and most cultures have ways for people to express empathy and compassion. These can be quite different, however. Different cultures have different norms for expressing empathy, cultivating compassion, and building trust.

In some cultures, expressing empathy or compassion directly may be perceived as overstepping, inappropriate, dishonorable, or rude. Such cultures may have indirect ways to express empathy that are more appropriate. This may be the opposite of other cultures, where expressing empathy or compassion directly is perceived as appropriate, vital, or necessary. Such cultures may find indirect expressions unsettling and strange.

For instance, Transitioners from some western cultures may have been brought up where expressing empathy or compassion directly was uncommon. They may prefer to increase expressing empathy directly. For them, this would be 'better' than the culture they grew up in, and they may sincerely want to share such 'betterment' with others. Such Transitioners run the risk of alienating people from a different culture to their own, who may have a different preference about directly expressing empathy and compassion.

An Inner Transition will ideally include various ways of expressing empathy and compassion that are appropriate for various cultures. This can be relatively easier for groups whose members are mostly from the same culture. If your Transition group is multi-cultural, or seeks to include people from different cultural backgrounds, a one-size-fits-all approach may not be helpful.

As your Transition group develops its own group culture (see [Culture Change](#)), it will ideally involve ways to cultivate compassion for self and others. Respect for differences, and honesty about preferences, can help cultivate compassion and build trust.

Compassion & Faith

Compassion is a part of most major faith-based traditions, with some variation. It can look like:

- praying for those who are suffering
- showing kindness to those less fortunate
- actively assisting those in need
- behaving compassionately, like respected role models within the faith
- forgiving those who have made mistakes.

For instance, Buddhism posits that all beings are One, and that differentiation is an illusion. Shantideva writes of *karuna*, the Buddhist term for compassion:

“Other beings' pain I do not feel, and yet, because I take them for myself, their suffering is mine and therefore hard to bear. And therefore I'll dispel the pain of others, for it is simply pain, just like my own. And others I will aid and benefit, for they are living beings, like my body. Since I and other beings both, in wanting happiness, are equal and alike, what difference is there to distinguish us, that I should strive to have my bliss alone?”

In other traditions this is not so. Some have central beliefs about separation and individuation. Rather than parts of the same body, such traditions liken separate individuals to extended family members, urging compassionate treatment of 'brothers and sisters.'

Individuals who are strongly attached to their perceptions, beliefs, and worldview may come from a culture where a person's identity is based on a healthy sense of self. Some faiths reinforce this idea. At the same time, many faiths offer guidance around balancing an individual's needs with compassion for others.

Try offering members of your group a chance to describe what compassion looks like in their faith-based tradition, if they have one. This can be supportive and educational for people of different faiths (and none) and an opportunity to build bridges across differences, creating connections around similarities.



Related Inner Transition Resources

Inquiry: Emotions
Negative Self-Talk + Resources
Self-Care Guides: Physical & Sensory, Nature, Mental, Emotional, Social & Worldview
Culture Change
Guide to Conflict
Giving and Receiving Feedback
Respecting 'Yes' and 'No'

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