

All Together ECHO Series

Compassion is Courage: How Our Neurobiology Supports Compassion Cultivation

Presenter: Don Cowie

Date: Oct 31, 2024



*The BC Centre for Palliative Care
is the provincial hub partner of the
Palliative Care ECHO Project in British
Columbia*



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We recognize that all of you joining us online may be participating from traditional territories of other Indigenous peoples. From coast to coast to coast, we acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territory of all the Inuit, Métis, and First Nations people that call this land home.

The Palliative Care ECHO Project

The Palliative Care ECHO Project is a 5-year national initiative to cultivate communities of practice and establish continuous professional development among health care providers across Canada who care for patients with life-limiting illness.

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Thank You

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Poll Questions

1. How well do you understand the process of compassion?
2. Can you explain the difference between empathy and compassion?
3. Do you think you (or anyone) can learn/grow in compassion through education and training?

Introductions

Presenter

Don Cowie MA

Spiritual Health Clinical Educator

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Fraser Health



Compassion is courage: How Our Neurobiology Supports Compassion Cultivation

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Supporting COMPASSION Cultivation

- Thank yous
- Encourage, equip and stir our imagination
- Compassion:
 - Definitions
 - New science
 - Self-compassion

A lit candle in a dark room, with a beam of light shining down on it. The candle is lit, and the light is visible as a bright orange and yellow flame. The background is dark, and the light from the candle creates a soft glow around it. The text is overlaid on the image.

A candle never loses any of its light
while lighting up another candle.

Rumi

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Patients affirm that the **human interactions** are most important to them in assessing the patient experience, followed by the processes they encounter and then the place in which they receive care

(Beryl Institute, 2018)

Purpose of *Compassion* Training

create both the **internal & external** conditions for
compassion to flourish





Compassion was identified as a **key contributor** to ED overall quality care ratings... Patient-reported *compassion* is an indicator of quality care that needs to be formally integrated into clinical care and quality care assessments.

(BMC Emergency Medicine, 2024)

So... **Compassion**

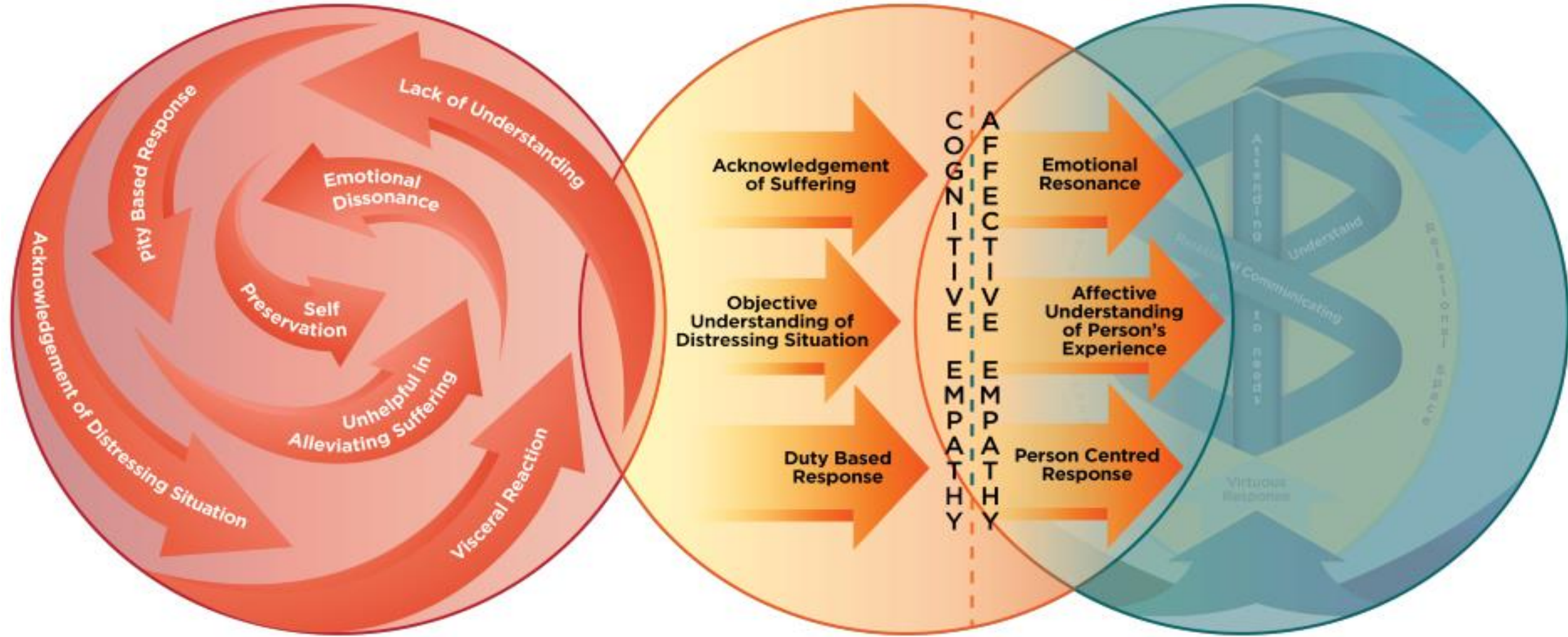
When you hear the word **compassion**-
what do you think of?



Sympathy

Empathy

Compassion



EMPATHY

“I am really sorry; I am glad you told me. That must be hard...My heart breaks with you and your family.”



Compassion



**“I am sorry this happened to you,
how can I come along side and support you?”**

“The brain networks associated with *compassion* and *empathy* don't overlap at all. They are completely different systems in the brain.

When people experience *raw empathy*, brain regions associated with **pain** and **negative** emotions become active.

But with *compassion*, it's a different network. It's brain regions associated with **positive emotions**, feelings of **connection**, and the ability to see from **someone else's perspective.**”

Dr Richard Davidson, 2020





“...when compassion is at work the insula, the amygdala, the temporal parietal junction and the pre-frontal cortex are all activated....

in addition to those parts of the brain, research suggests that there are also biological changes in the brain's pathways when compassion occurs.

First, there's the caregiver-nurturance pathway in the hypothalamic mid-brain. And there's the **dopamine reward pathway.**”

(NICABM 13)



“What characterizes compassion is that the parts of the nervous system that can transform a kind of fight-or-flight stress response, shift you into what looks more like a **caregiving** or a **courage** response.”

(National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine)

Empathy

- Depleting
- Lights up “**pain**” regions of the brain

Compassion

- Nourishing
- lights up the “**love**” regions of the brain.
- causes a release of oxytocin & dopamine



Compassion

1. inhibits fear and activates courage.
2. shifts dynamics in specific brain regions so that we're better able to manage difficult emotions and tolerate distress.
3. enhances heart rate variability.
4. improves mental health and psychosocial functioning.



(Nicabm, 2019 transcript)



"If you want *others* to be **happy**, practice **compassion**.

If *you* want to be **happy**, practice **compassion**."

Dalai Lama

A close-up photograph of two hands clasped together in a supportive grip. The hands are positioned in the center-left of the frame, with fingers interlaced. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric. The overall tone is warm and comforting.

What is Compassion?

- A complex, unfolding process in the mind, heart and body that shapes our **responses** to suffering.

(Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science)

- a virtuous **response** that seeks to address the suffering and needs of a person through relational understanding and action.'

(Sinclair, 2016)

What is Compassion?

- always and only arises in **response to suffering**
- a **distinct response to suffering**, that includes action to relieve it.

(Stanford ACT, 2019)

Defining Suffering

- A wide range of **unpleasant subjective experiences** including physical and emotional pain, trauma, psychological distress, and existential anguish, and feelings of disconnection.

(Baumeister & Leary, 1995)

- Any moment of time when our experience is **other than the way we would like it.**




Compassion

SEEING the suffering

FEELING concern (empathy)

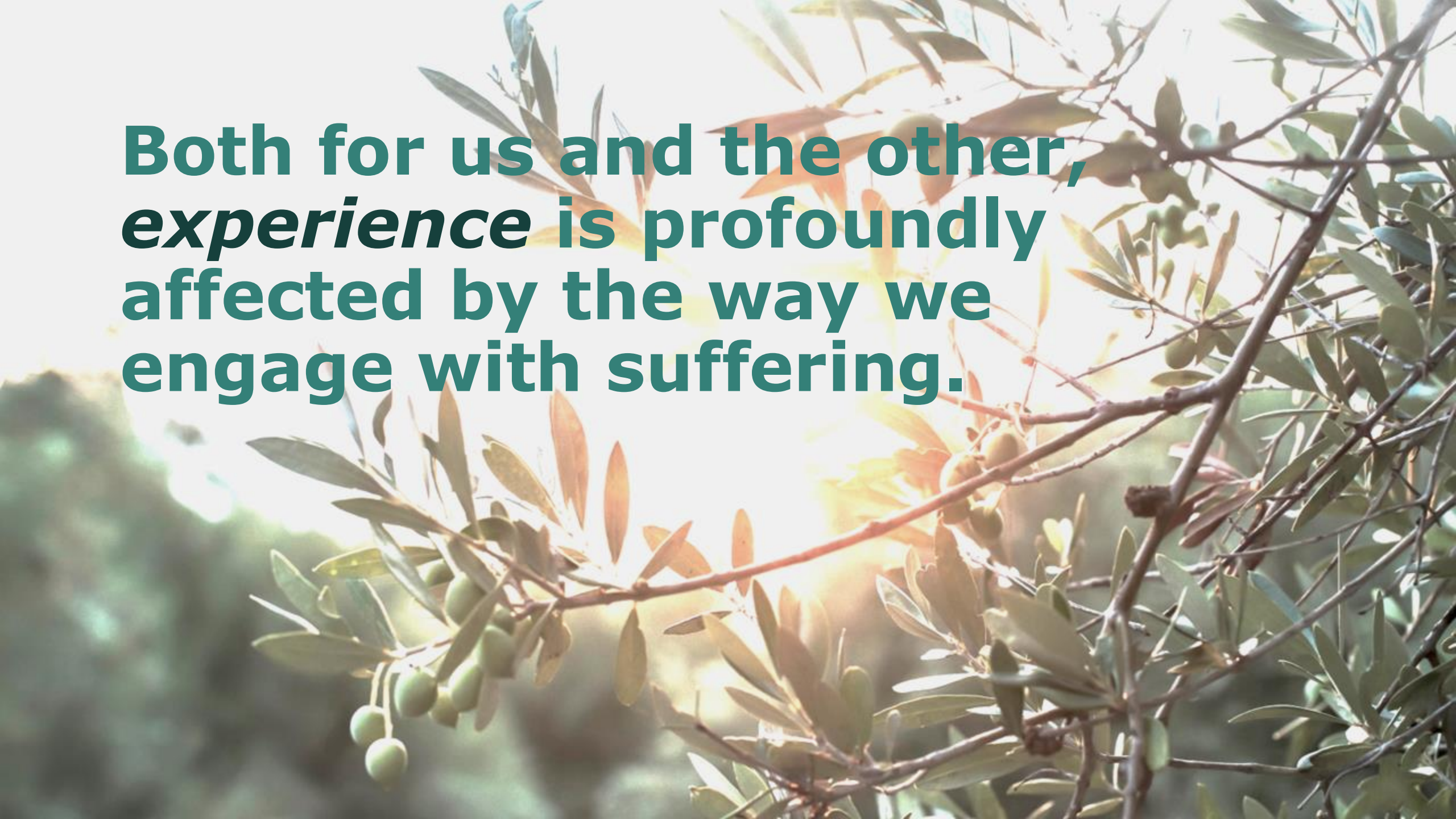
Experiencing **CONNECTION**

DOING something to lessen or
relieve the suffering



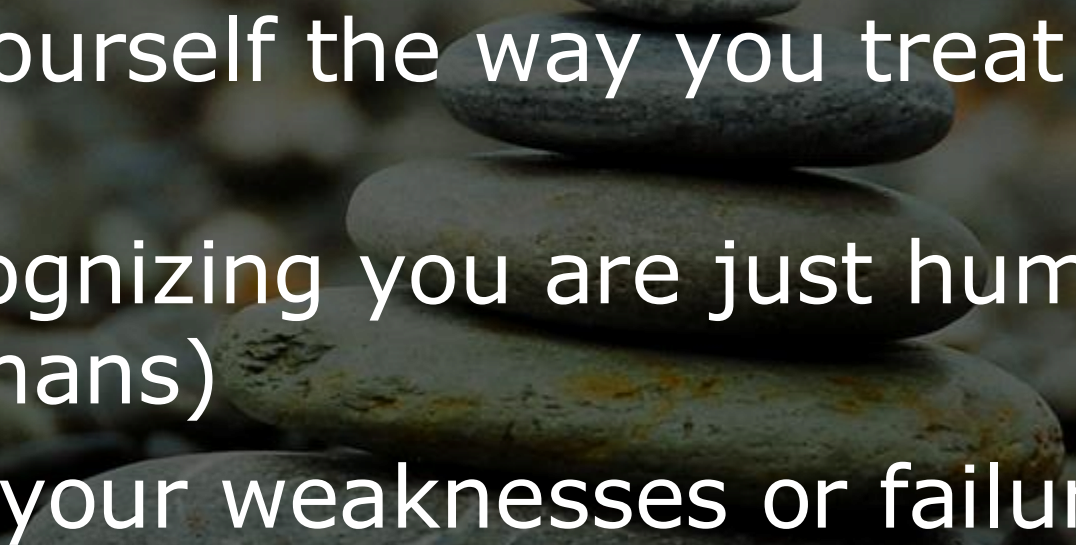
Empathy is good- and **HARD** on us

Compassion is good for us


A close-up photograph of an olive branch with several green olives. The branch is set against a bright, hazy background of sunlight filtering through leaves, creating a warm, golden glow. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**Both for us and the other,
experience is profoundly
affected by the way we
engage with suffering.**

Self-Compassion

- Self-kindness: treating yourself the way you treat someone you love
 - Common humanity: recognizing you are just human (amongst other just humans)
 - Awareness: you are not your weaknesses or failures
- 

Self-Compassion

- *Recognize* and *accept* your own suffering
 - Allow yourself to *feel* the suffering (pain) and *empathize*
 - Treating yourself the way you treat someone you love-
self-kindness rather than self judgement
- 



Negativity Bias

Negativity bias is a form of cognitive bias. It is an asymmetry that occurs **when we process negative and positive information** *in an attempt to make sense of our environment*. Specifically, we attend to, learn from, and use **negative information more often than positive information**.

Negativity Bias

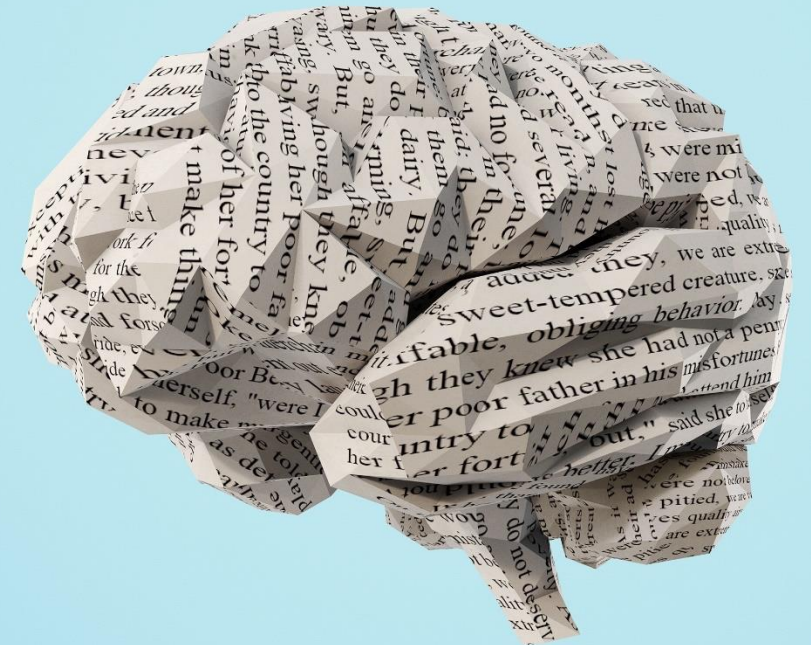


To help us survive, the brain learned to seek out information that **signaled danger**

Kassiani Nikolopoulou

Effects of Self compassion

- Supports, rather than threatens, the self- release of oxytocin and dopamine
- Opens perception rather than being threat-focused
- Mitigates against depression, and promotes resilience, openness to learning, stability, and emotional connection with others





Empathy is a **biological response** towards the **pain** of others- but *we minimize our own pain*

If we **turn towards our own suffering** with kindness, **compassion will emerge.**

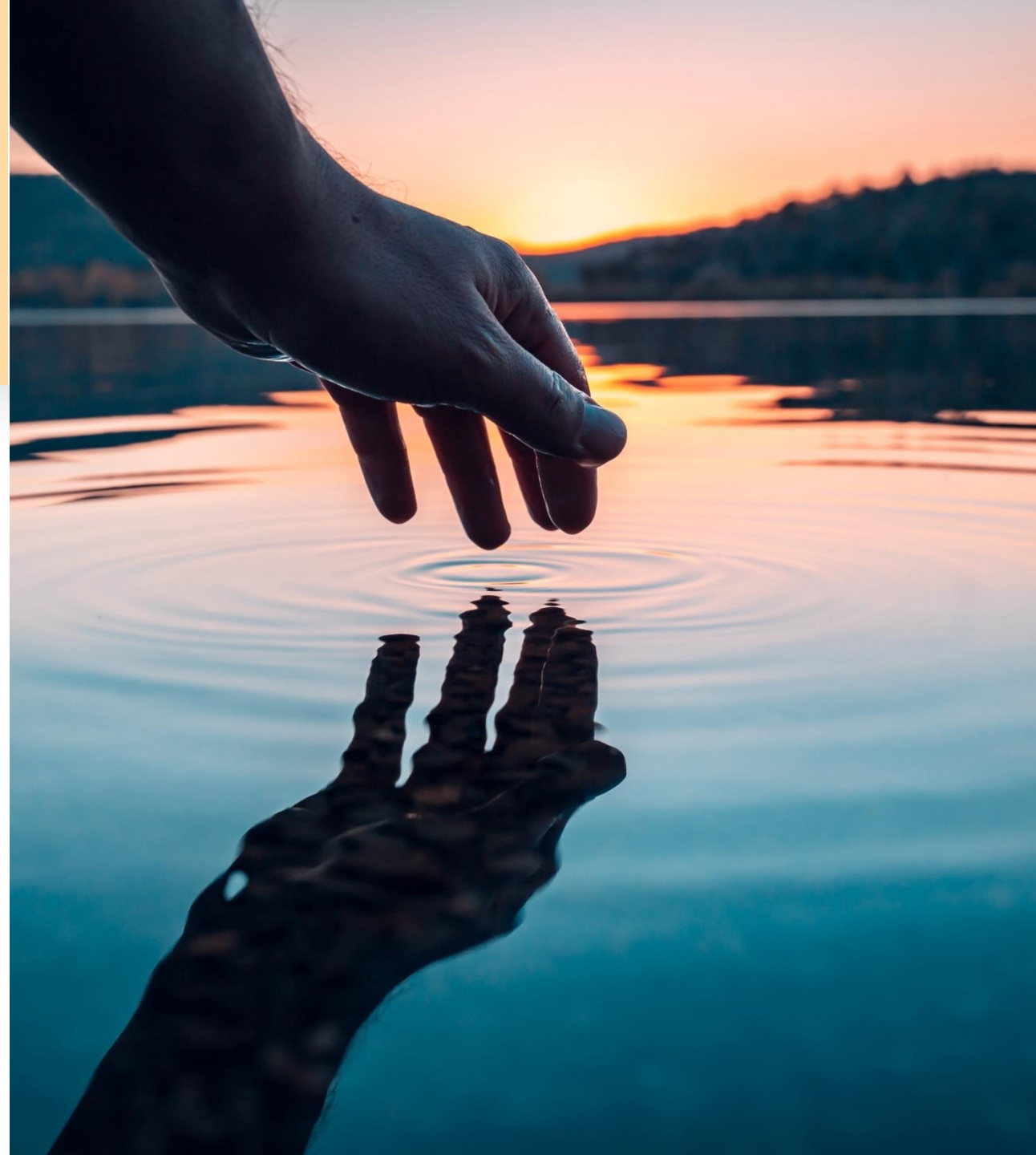


Applying Self-Compassion

- Compassionate touch
- Words of affirmation
- Become aware of the "greater field of compassion"

Self Compassion Exercise

- Think about a friend feeling bad about themselves
- Think about a time when you felt bad about yourself
- Is there a difference in how you respond?
- What do you think would change if you treated yourself like your friend?






**When your fear touches someone's pain
it becomes pity;
when your love touches someone's pain,
it becomes compassion.
To train in compassion, then, is to know
all beings are the same and suffer in similar
ways, to honor all those who suffer,
and to know you are neither separate
from nor superior to anyone.**

Stephen Levine

What and How?



What can we do to support compassion?
What can I do to support compassion?
What can you do to awaken compassion?

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Some Sources

The Science of Empathy Helen Riess,

Beryl Institute

The Science of Self-compassion C. Germer

The Landscape of Compassion, Emma Seppala

The Compassionate Brain, Olga Klimecki

Empathy and Compassion, Olga Klimencki

Compassion Revealed: What We Know About

Compassion at Work, Jacoba M. Lilius

Compassionomics, Stephen Trzeciak



Impact of a Compassionate Care Leadership Program

NICABM Neurobiology of Compassion.
Applications- transcript

Compassion in Health Care: An Empirical Model, Shane Sinclair

Clinical applications of Compassion- Module 1-the neurobiology of compassion transcript, nicabm, 2019

www.communitymindfulnessproject.com

“What role does compassion have on quality care ratings? A regression analysis and validation of the SCQ in emergency department patients.” Harrison Boss^{1,5}, Cara MacInnis^{2,5}, Roland Simon³, Jeanette Jackson³, Markus Lahtinen³ and Shane Sinclair



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