

## Applying the Science of Compassion to One's Life

### Overview

In order to act compassionately we must first define it and make sense of what it means to us. The goal of SEE Learning is to create a more aware and compassionate world through the education of the heart and the mind. The below referenced enduring capabilities help us to move from a conceptual understanding to engaging in compassionate activities.

#### **Understanding Others' Feelings and Emotions in Context**

Understand others' feelings and reactions in relation to the situations in which they occur, and understand that, like oneself, others have feelings caused by needs.

#### **Appreciating and Cultivating Kindness and Compassion**

Value the benefits of kindness and compassion and purposefully nourish them as a disposition.

#### **Appreciating and Cultivating Other Ethical Dispositions**

Value and foster development of ethical dispositions and prosocial emotions such as forgiveness, patience, contentment, generosity, and humility.

The first capability is **Understanding Others' Feelings and Emotions in Context**. When an individual sees another person act in a way they do not approve of, it is natural to react with judgment. However when we seek to understand that another person's actions are spurred by an emotion this can lead to empathy and compassion rather than anger and judgment. The intention, of course, is not to excuse inappropriate behavior but to understand others and their emotions on a human level.

The next capability is **Appreciating and Cultivating Kindness and Compassion**. Compassion serves as a powerful guiding principle for ethical behavior that benefits oneself and others. In order for compassion to serve as a guiding principle we need to understand what compassion is and what it is not. We also need to value compassion as something that they wish to cultivate.

The third capability is **Appreciating and Cultivating Other Ethical Dispositions**. Some of these ethical dispositions include gratitude, forgiveness, contentment, humility, and patience. These ethical dispositions refer to inner qualities—rather than material possessions or accomplishments. A focus

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on valuing people and appreciating how they have enriched one's life stands in opposition to self-promotion.

### **The Science of Compassion**

The primatologist Frans de Waal points out that all mammalian and bird species require maternal care to survive, due to the fact that offspring cannot live on their own after birth, and he provides numerous examples of non-human species expressing empathy and engaging in altruistic acts (De Waal, 2010). Altruistic behavior in various species, including humans, creates reciprocal bonding. This means that we feel connected to others. Research shows us that this sense of connection supports survival and flourishing on both the individual and group levels. In bird and mammalian species, including the human species, compassion is therefore a matter of survival, which may explain why we respond so positively to it, even on a physiological level (De Waal, 2010).

In humans, a preference for kindness manifests at a very young age. Studies by developmental psychologists suggest that infants as young as three months of age prefer individuals who exhibit helping behavior to those who exhibit antisocial behavior.(Hamlin and Wynn, 2011). As one such researcher, Kiley Hamlin, notes, "Though we may think of them as interested only in their own desires, given the chance, toddlers under two [years of age] show generosity. We find them willing to share—to give their treats away. And this makes them happy." (Goleman, 2015).

Research shows that while there is a leveling off of reported satisfaction with life after a certain level of material well-being, there are strong links between gratitude and happiness in children, adolescents, and adults. Not only is gratitude related to greater life satisfaction, but a sense of appreciation for received benefits also increases prosocial behaviors (Froh et al, 2011).

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### The Benefits of Compassion

Extensive research has shown that engaging in compassion-based activities has significant physical, emotional, social, and relationship benefits.

- Academic Achievement and Learning (Hart & Kindle Hodson, 2004)
- Increased Happiness and Wellbeing (Pace, et al. 2009)
- Sense of Purpose and Selfworth (Neff et al., 2007)
- Improved Relationships (Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009)
- Reduced Stress (Fogarty, et al., 1999 and Pace, et al. 2009)
- Improved Medical Outcomes (Lelorain, Brédart, Dolbeault, & Sultan, 2012)
- Increased Social Connectedness (Seppala et al., 2013)

### References

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