

# Compassion Is Good For You

## La Compasión es Buena para Ti

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### Abstract

Compassion, the extending of sympathy to someone in distress, has long been regarded as a virtue by diverse religious groups. More recently, psychology has examined this trait, differentiating it from love, altruism, and empathy. Neuropsychologists have explored the role that might be played by the brain's mirror neurons in evoking compassion both in humans and in other animals. Evolutionary psychologists have suggested that compassion may be an adaptive trait, playing a vital role in human evolution. Transpersonal psychologists have emphasized the spiritual aspects of compassion as well as its health benefits; for example, compassionate recover more quickly from diseases. Compassion reflects people's social nature and may be taught and applied in a variety of settings.

**Keywords:** altruism, compassion, empathy, transformation, transpersonal

### Resumen

La compasión, la extensión de la simpatía hacia alguien en una situación de malestar, ha sido considerada desde hace mucho tiempo como una virtud por diversos grupos religiosos. Más recientemente, la psicología ha examinado este rasgo, diferenciándolo del amor, el altruismo y la empatía. La neuropsicología ha explorado el papel que podrían desempeñar las neuronas espejo del cerebro en la evocación de la compasión, tanto en humanos como en otros animales. Los psicólogos evolutivos han sugerido que la compasión puede ser un rasgo adaptativo, jugando un papel vital en la evolución humana. Los psicólogos transpersonales han hecho hincapié en los aspectos espirituales de la compasión, así como en sus beneficios para la salud; por ejemplo, una persona compasiva se recupera más rápidamente de las enfermedades. La compasión refleja la naturaleza social de las personas y puede ser enseñada y aplicada en una variedad de entornos.

**Palabras clave:** altruismo, compasión, empatía, transformación, transpersonal

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## Introduction

Mirror neurons, first observed in the monkey brain by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his colleagues, fire both when a monkey executes an action and when it observes someone carrying out a similar action. The same is true for mirror neuron systems in the human brain that are more active than other systems both when the human executes an action and when observing actions from that type of action being performed. Since the discovery, writers in “pop psychology” have attributed numerous benevolent acts to mirror neurons, stretching the data beyond what they actually represent (Kilner & Lemon, 2013). Nonetheless, these speculations have brought attention to such phenomena as altruism, empathy, and compassion.

Altruism, the unselfish regard for and devotion to the interests and well-being of others, implies action, as in “altruistic acts,” which are activities that benefit someone else, often at the cost to the altruist. Empathy is the visceral or emotional experience of another person’s feelings. It is the understanding of another person from a frame of reference other than one’s own, but does not imply that behavior will follow. “Empathic feelings” do not always lead to “altruistic acts.” Compassion, the extending of sympathy to someone in distress, involves an emotional reaction that typically motivates help, comfort, and assistance. Is an emotional response when perceiving suffering and involves an authentic desire to alleviate the suffering. Hence a “compassionate feeling” typically triggers a “compassionate act.”

For example, one might give food to a starving family out of altruism, believing that “this is the right thing to do.” This contrasts with altruism, where the emotion is strong and where no rationale is needed. Compassion, however, combines thinking and feeling. It is a felt response that triggers a desire to help. A starving family, of course, is happy to get the food and is not concerned about what motivated the act. In the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, the sight of a groaning figure by the side of a road probably evoked empathy, but instead of translating this feeling into compassion, the two “holy men” tried to avoid it, deliberately moving away from the suffering figure. It remained for the Samaritan, a member of a different sect than that of the sufferer, to make a compassionate act of help, offering assistance.

Psychology is often defined as the scientific study of experience and behavior, and its social, theoretical, and research implications. Transper-

sonal psychology can be thought of as the scientific study of experiences and behaviors in which the socially-constructed self appears to be transcended to encompass higher, lower, and broader dimensions of reality. Those “higher” dimensions might include transcendent realms and agencies. The “lower” dimensions may include the collective unconscious as well as the “Ground of Being.” The “broader” dimensions could include other sentient beings, Nature, and the Cosmos. Transpersonal psychology also investigates the social, theoretical, and research aspects of its subject matter, especially in regard to personal and community transformation. This essay will explore the religious and spiritual perspectives of compassion as well as its psychological aspects. In so doing, it will become apparent that compassion is a vital component of transpersonal psychology and its social, theoretical, and research implications.

## Religious and Spiritual Perspectives

The etymology of the English language word “compassion” is Latin, meaning “co-suffering.” It is related in origin to the English word “patient,” one who suffers. There are various degrees of compassion often referred to as the “depths” of passion or the “vigor” of the compassionate act. This is especially apparent in Hinduism where compassion is a virtue with many “shades,” with each shade given a different term. The appropriate Hindu term is *daya*, the virtuous desire to mitigate the sorrow and difficulties of others by putting forth whatever effort is necessary. *Daya* is viewed as treating a stranger, a relative, a friend, or a foe as one’s own self since all living beings are part of one’s self. Mahatma Gandhi is viewed as a paragon of Hindu compassion.

In Judaism, God is viewed as the Father of Compassion and *Rahmana* (i.e., compassion) becomes the usual designation God’s revealed Word. The rabbis speak of thirteen attributes of compassion, as well as the importance of compassion to animals. In the first century CE, Rabbi Hillel the Elder provided a summary of the Jewish religion by stating, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah. The rest is the explanation.”

The Buddha is cited as saying “Compassion is that which makes the heart of the good move at the pain of others. It crushes and destroys the pain of others... It shelters and embraces the distressed.” *Karuna* or compassion is the heart of Buddhist teachings, often referred to as “loving

kindness.” The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has said, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” It springs up by considering that all beings, like ourselves, wish to be free from suffering.

In the Christian Bible, God is referred to as “the Father of Compassion.” *Corinthians* 1:3-7 notes: “just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” Jesus embodies for Christians the essence of compassion; in the Sermon on the Mount he stated that “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.” In a Biblical parable, the Good Samaritan demonstrated compassion and the *Gospels* advocate extending compassion to all, even to one’s enemies.

The Muslim scriptures urge compassion toward captive as well as to widows, orphans, and the poor. Compassion, or *Rahman*, emerges from fasting during Ramadan to help one empathize with the hunger of the less fortunate. Each of the 114 chapters of the Quran, with one exception, begins with the verse, “In the name of Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful.” Mohammed is referred to by the Quran as the Mercy for the World.

Compassion for all life, human and non-human, is central to Jainism. As a result, vegetarianism is advocated and Jain monks go to great lengths to avoid killing insects, and many cities and towns in India contain animal shelters run by Jains. Jains refuse to eat food obtained with unnecessary cruelty.

The Church of Humanism was founded in New York City in 1973. It is a humanistic organization based on the concept of God understood as an ideal reality to be optimally actualized in the life of individuals and in society at large. It is an example of “congregational humanism.” There are other humanist groups that are secular, and avoid the “religious” label. The Church of Humanism holds that human beings bear a unique and sacred responsibility for one another and for the planet Earth. Therefore the development of human capacities for compassion, reason, and intuition support its religious aspirations.

### Psychological Perspectives

Emma Seppala (2013) takes the position that compassion is a natural and automatic response that has ensured human survival. Further, de Wall (2013) cites evidence that rats go out of their way to help a suffering rat out of this quandary. Chimpanzees do the same and so do human infants too young to have learned the “rules of

politeness” (Seppala, 2013, p. 20). Apparently, they do so out of intrinsic motivation without expectation of a reward. Seppala has conducted research that indicates that infants’ eye pupils’ diameters decrease both when they help and when they see someone else helping. This suggests that they help because helping feels good. The alleviation of suffering brings a reward whether or not one is the active agent in the act.

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, compassion can be viewed as a distinct emotional state, different from distress, sadness, and love. Darwin felt that cooperation was highly adaptive in human evolution and that identifying with another person is an essential human capacity. The term “survival of the fittest” was coined by Hebert Spencer, not Charles Darwin who actually disliked the term (Loye, 2000). Darwin’s work, according to Seppala, is best described with the phrase “survival of the kindest.” Graham Music (2014) adds that humans are “primed” for altruism and empathy as well. Seeing someone help another person creates a shift in mood; people can be moved to tears by seeing someone’s loving and compassionate behavior in action. Thus, the stereotype of Darwin as the promulgator of competition is not based on a careful reading of Darwin’s work, especially his later writings.

Compassion may have ensured human survival because of its tremendous health benefits. Ed Diener and Martin Seligman (2004) report that connecting with others in a meaningful way helps people enjoy mental and physical health and speeds up recovery from disease. Steve Cole and his associates (2007) evaluated the levels of cellular inflammation in people who described themselves as “very happy”. Inflammation is at the root of cancer and other diseases and is generally high in people who live under considerable stress. People who were happy simply because they lived a hedonic “good life” had high inflammation levels but those who lived a life of purpose and meaning had low inflammation levels. These people focused less on satisfying themselves and more on others, living a life rich in compassion, altruism, and greater meaning. This compassionate lifestyle may also serve as a buffer against stress.

Gary Saunders (2014) makes a connection between the social nature of humans and consciousness itself, stating “Consciousness is about how we share our world and what we have in common with one another, so although it is *my* conscious experience of *your* conscious experience, it is also *our* conscious experience; it is a *social psychological* feature of people’s lives” (p. 1). The nature of the person “goes beyond the

skin” (p. 41), a metaphor used by the philosopher Alan Watts, an early precursor of transpersonal psychology.

Seppala (2013) speculates that another reason why compassion may boost people’s health is that it can help them broaden their perspective beyond themselves. Seppala does not use the term, but she is describing people who have a “transpersonal” lifestyle. Depression and anxiety are typically linked to focusing on oneself and a preoccupation with “me, myself, and I” (p. 23). In a compassionate act, self-focus shifts to other-focus. As attention shifts to helping others, one’s mood lifts. The lack of social connection is a greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure. Social connections lead to increased longevity (p. 23). Cole and his associates (2007) found that genes impacted by social connections also code for immune function and inflammation.

People with a “transpersonal” lifestyle have lower rates of anxiety and depression, are more empathic to others, more trusting and cooperative, and, as a consequence, people are more open to trusting and cooperating with them. Social connectedness generates a positive feedback loop of social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true for those who lack social connectedness. Lower social connectedness is associated with declines in physical and psychological health as well as a higher propensity for antisocial behavior that, in turn, leads to more social isolation (Seppala, 2013, p. 24). Adopting a compassionate, “transpersonal” lifestyle appears to boost social connection and improve psychological and physical health.

Compassion seems to be contagious. James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis (2010) conducted research demonstrating that acts of generosity and kindness evoke more generosity in a chain reaction of goodness. An act of compassion will uplift others and make them happy. Although compassion is a naturally evolved trait, there is evidence that a variety of “loving kindness” meditation practices may help to cultivate compassion. E.W. Dunne and his associates (2008), in a study published in the prestigious journal *Science*, found that spending money on others promotes happiness. Given the importance of compassion in the world today, this body of research may impact communities worldwide.

Seppala (2013) concludes that the practice of compassion is as important for health as physical exercise and a healthy diet, and recommends that it be taught and applied in schools, hospitals, the military and other community settings (p. 25). In one study, the simple act of tapping one’s hands

in synchrony with another person produced feelings similar to their partner and increased the average time spent in a helping act. There is nothing special about tapping but perhaps tapping in synchrony may increase compassion for one’s neighbors, especially if accompanied by thinking of them enjoying the same food or drink.

David Loye (2000) reminds his readers that Darwin’s “lost theory of love” is crucially needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “Darwin’s vision of the moral sense remains in the background shaping our personal, social, economic, political, educational, and religious world. That is, it is the hidden driver of our cultural world emerging out of the wider environmental world affecting all other species along with ourselves” (p. 227). Darwin is rarely cited in discussions of transpersonal topics, yet a close reading of his work reveals that he foresaw the thrust of human evolution as social not selfish, as compassionate not competitive. This is the vision that remains to be actualized, a vision shared by religious and spiritual seers for millennia and now entering into scientific domains, especially those with a transpersonal emphasis.

Religious and spiritual teachings have elevated compassion to one of the salient human virtues. Psychological science is now providing evidence that compassion is not only good. It is good for you.

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