

## Compassion

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We live in a turbulent time. We argue about politics, and our children are often depressed or the victim of opioids. As teachers, pastors, and counselors, we often experience burnout. In the Bay Area a mini-crisis faces schools for the large number of teachers who quit in mid-year. We are taught in all major religions that we must offer kindness, care, and love toward others. The Golden Rule is still operative. But how should we treat ourselves?

The historian of religion Karen Armstrong, in her book [Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life](#), explains that "The Principle of Compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves." But we often fail to see that while compassion leads us toward others, we also need to turn that compassion towards ourselves. We need to treat ourselves with kindness, care, and love.

At first this seems to be another kind of egotism. But cultivating inner strength has the purpose of allowing us to be more effective in caring for others. Who has not been the victim of critical self-talk or judging oneself to the point of inaction or depression?

Kristin Neff in her book [Self-Compassion](#) explains that "...self-compassion involves wanting health and well-being for oneself and leads to proactive behavior to better one's situation..." Life brings us the gifts of joy and suffering. Self-compassion does not deliver us from suffering, but allows us to honestly experience the suffering and the resilience to deal with it.

From a religious perspective, if we realize that we are created in the image of God, we know that we have great value, great creativity, and a profound purpose. From the point of view of psychologist Paul Gilbert (in his book [The Compassionate Mind](#)) "Research has also shown that the way we relate to ourselves - whether we regard ourselves kindly or critically, in a friendly and affectionate way or hostilely - can have a major influence on our ability to get through life's difficulties and create within ourselves a source of well-being."

Gilbert and others have explained that our brains develop throughout our lives. What is called neuro-plasticity. So as with any new learning process, the brain needs to be trained to focus on self-compassion. One method involves mindful meditation, a goal of which is to observe situations as they truly are without the strong emotions that color our awareness. Neff writes that we judge ourselves critically based on some impossible standard of perfection, whereas mindful meditation allows us to be more effective by allowing us to see more clearly how to deal with the reality of our situation.

To love makes us a loving person; to care makes us a caring person; to sacrifice makes us a sacrificial person. If we realize the value of what we do for others, our sense of self-worth increases with every act of compassion. We need not compare ourselves to others. We need not worry about being too skinny or too chubby. By acting compassionately on a personal level, we enhance the quality of our lives, our well-being. Ideally, all relationships can be enhanced. On a cultural level, all institutions can embody the ideals of compassion. Businesses can do well and do good. Art can nourish our souls in offering us objects of beauty. Communities can genuinely be a source of love and care.

The parent-child, or more specifically the mother-child relationship, determines the quality of love and care we receive. This is the foundation of the compassionate life. We are made to receive love and to give love. If we receive it imperfectly, our brain can still be trained to mature our love. Religion speaks about rebirth, the ability to transform our lives at any point. Perhaps with a spiritual parent. We then become more capable of loving others as we learn to be compassionate to ourselves as well. We become aware of what magnificent human beings we are.