Empathy and Compassion

As a psychotherapist and meditation teacher, I have often thought about the intersection between empathy and compassion. I hope we can all enjoy and benefit from reviewing this interactive aspect of human experience.

We are all “hardwired” to be empathetic; although those of us on the autistic spectrum may struggle with empathy, generally the human species is highly socialized. We co-create each other through relationships, and empathy plays an important role in the process throughout one’s life, whether we are aware of its influence or not.

In preparing this talk, I enlisted the support of my new-found acquaintance, ChatGPT, for a summary of the topic. As a well-informed reader, I agree with what ChatGPT describes:

Empathy and compassion are both key components of emotional intelligence and human connection, but they do have some distinct differences.

* **Empathy** is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. It's like putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, mentally and emotionally. There are different types of empathy, such as cognitive empathy (understanding another's perspective) and emotional empathy (feeling what another person is feeling). Essentially, it's about "feeling with" someone.
* **Compassion**, on the other hand, takes things a step further. It involves not only understanding or feeling someone else’s pain but also having a desire to alleviate it. Compassion moves beyond just recognition and empathy to action—it's about caring for others' suffering and being motivated to help them in some way.

In simpler terms, empathy is about *feeling* and compassion is about *doing*.

I would add behavioral mimicry into the mix in describing empathy. An example of this would be the ways that we mirror another person’s gestures, which we are often unaware of. This mimicry is synchronized with the emotional and cognitive empathetic functions. If empathy is innate, how we process and respond to empathetic experiences is conditioned by familial and cultural conditioning. This conditioning can create a response to “reading” a situation and responding in a way that is either socially harmful or beneficial.

The cognitive and emotional stimulation of a social interaction produces an internal and personalized understanding called “mentalizing” or “theory of mind” in social psychology. The function of mindfulness is to be aware of how this understanding forms a sense of “myself” and “the other”, which may focus on one person, a group of people, a culture, or even our pets!

Parts of the brain create a meaningful interpretation through this process in an ongoing way, based on memories from prior experience. For example, a child enters a schoolroom with no previous memories of social interactions in that setting, and they are teased and humiliated by one or more of the students. The facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and choice of words create an emotionally and cognitively impactful memory trace that is painful and creates a self-identity and an other-identity organized around this empathetic interaction—the child’s empathy system reads the emotional tone and behavioral routines and makes an assumption that there is something wrong with him or her, and this creates a pattern that persists. As an adult, that person might walk into the classroom of his or her child, and immediately become alert to facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and choice of words without even being aware that is happening, and feel the same surge of shame and self-consciousness, and become shy and awkward, or perhaps angry and defiant afterwards.

Alternately, a person who is skillful at mindfully monitoring their interpretation of the recurring dysfunctional pattern and is able to disregard the emerging unpleasant self-state and instead practice a more effective presence in the classroom situation.

A skillful manipulator can empathetically be sensitive to the emotional tones of another person or group of people and cleverly respond in ways that play off the emotions that arise. This is one of the basic strategies involved with consumer marketing and political leadership. This marketing can be associated with creating the desire to buy a car, a brand of food, or a political perspective. The viewer of a commercial empathizes with the rehearsed and performative happiness of the car buyer and wants that happiness also, which can motivate an unwise purchase. This manipulation of empathy can also be used to create fear and mistrust, a major issue of societal conflict in many areas of the world.

In any case, the ability to mindfully monitor the way the mind is empathetically stimulated and be able to free oneself from being manipulated can be very beneficial for one’s peace of mind and ability to successfully negotiate interpersonal conflicts or unwholesome social conditioning.

As described above by ChatGPT, compassion represents a wise response to the distress and confusion of the world, both interpersonally and culturally.

From a Buddhist perspective, one can understand the “near enemy” and “far enemy” of compassion, which represent distorted and dysfunctional feelings, beliefs and actions. Once again, I allow ChatGPT to do the research for me, although I am already familiar with the topic:

The phrase *"near and far enemy of compassion"* refers to two different kinds of obstacles that can distort or undermine true compassion. These are often discussed in Buddhist teachings, but the concept can apply more broadly as well.

**1. Near Enemy of Compassion:**

The near enemy is something that looks like compassion on the surface but is actually different. It's a distortion of true compassion. This can be:

* **Pity**: While compassion involves understanding suffering and desiring to alleviate it, pity often has a condescending quality. It creates a sense of separation, where the person feeling pity sees themselves as "better" than the one they pity. Compassion, in contrast, involves an equal recognition of suffering, without a hierarchy.
* **Sentimentality**: This involves feeling emotional and sad for others but not taking any real action to help. It's an attachment to feeling good about oneself rather than being genuinely concerned for the other person's well-being.
* **Attachment**: Sometimes, people can feel "compassionate" toward someone because they're attached to that person. This can lead to a desire to "help" in a way that actually reinforces dependency rather than offering true support.

**2. Far Enemy of Compassion:**

The far enemy, on the other hand, is something that is completely opposite to compassion. It’s an outright rejection of or hostility toward the suffering of others. This could include:

* **Indifference**: The far enemy of compassion is when we don’t care at all about the suffering of others. It’s the absence of empathy or concern, often resulting from emotional numbing or apathy.
* **Cruelty**: This is the active desire to cause harm or suffering to others, which is the antithesis of compassion. Where compassion seeks to alleviate suffering, cruelty exacerbates it.

In short, the near enemy is something that may feel like compassion, but is ultimately misguided or superficial, while the far enemy is a direct denial of compassion or an active aversion to others' suffering. Both the near and far enemies can prevent us from developing genuine, healthy compassion.

How can we use our meditation training to become mindfully aware of empathy and wisely respond through the cultivation of compassion?

1: Using mindfulness of breathing meditation practice, cultivate a quality of consciousness that is relatively free of the scattered and “noisy” characteristics of an untrained mind. This is greatly benefitted through daily meditation practice that focuses primarily on quieting and stabilizing the mind. This creates a heightened sensitivity to the impulsive reactivity of empathy as it shapes understanding of an interpersonal encounter, along with the ability to systematically disregard the urge to act briefly and create the mental “space” to develop compassion; Shaila Catherine calls this the “potent pause”, and Pema Chodron describes the effect as not getting “hooked” by craving and clinging. The potent pause and becoming unhooked creates an ability to analyze the empathetic response to an interpersonal or social experience.

2: Recognize the distress and confusion that is associated with the empathy. We are able to recognize it through the process of mentalizing, that is, imagining the distress and confusion that is shaping the other person's or group’s behavior “ “as if it were my own”. The goal is to understand that the empathetic feeling tone is just a condition in the flow of consciousness which can be effectively modified towards compassion.

3: Consider the kindest and most compassionate response to the situation, determining what would be the wisest action (or inaction) in the situation, and respond accordingly. Of course, there is great benefit through discerning the near or far enemy of compassion with clarity and a willingness to make an internal “course correction” if that is warranted.

4: When witnessing the distress and confusion that is revealed through some media sources such as tv or computer streaming, realize that any empathetic upset does not require immediate action, but first to recognize your own empathetic response, which may be the result of manipulation that may be related to consumerism or political manipulation. If that is the case, practice self-compassion and then decide what the wisest response might be.

Below are various articles and a YouTube video associated with these issues:

The following reference describes one potential outcome from our cultural conditioning as a result of consumerism, the experience of jealousy and envy:

**Americans Are Thriving. Why Don’t We Feel Like It?**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/20/opinion/grateful-thanks-america-envy.html>

The next reference involves a provocative article in the NYT that explores how contemporary MAGA conservative culture is adversely impacting evangelical Christianity, instead intentionally cultivating the far enemy of compassion through a strictly transactional modeling of what it means to be Christian:

**Why Politics Feels So Cruel Right Now**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/02/opinion/end-of-empathy-politics.html>

This view frames the justification for the “Big Beautiful Bill”, which systematically attacks any domestic or international governmental program that helps those other than the wealthy as wasteful and complaining that compassion and generosity are only for those who are weak and unworthy.

This final reference focuses on a Buddhist Monk who also has a PhD in in Molecular Genetics and the equivalent level of professional training as a teacher of Buddhism. The recording is a little more than 4 minutes long, and he explains that when a human witnesses the suffering of another, the area of the brain that is activated in the person who’s suffering, the same area of the witness’s brain is activated*, whether the witness is aware of that or not, and that person’s response may or may not manifest compassion.* This lack of internal awareness is not personified by Ricard, as he is extraordinarily self-aware, and deeply trained to identify and manifest lovingkindness and compassion:

**Matthieu Ricard: The Crucial Difference Between Empathy and Compassion**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Seuy9VrKDlY>