



Mindfulness and Compassion

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June 26, 2019

I recently participated in an online conference, The Mindful Healthcare Summit, a 5-day event bringing together leading neuroscience researchers, mindfulness experts, and dedicated medical professionals who are making a difference in their healthcare systems, universities, and hospitals nationwide. The purpose was to learn evidence-based practices to improve patient care, support personal well-being and help address systemic challenges within the healthcare system. This conference was created by the Awake Networkⁱ. One recurring theme was the use of mindfulness techniques to lessen stress and help to prevent the loss of compassion due to burnout.

Burnout is a major issue affecting a majority of physicians, nurses and other healthcare givers. Burnout is caused by the intensity of their work exacerbated by the stress of the way the current health care system is organized. For example, providers are asked to see more patients in less time, use inefficient electronic medical record systems, and work longer hours. Under these circumstances, compassion is lessened or lost. Other consequences of this current situation is that are many health professionals are becoming less productive, depressed, leaving, or committing suicide.

As I listened to the conference speakers, I realized that there are lessons that all of us can benefit from. Health care workers are expected to be compassionate but aren't we all? Patients expect their caregivers to be compassionate, but don't we expect that of everyone? How can mindfulness build and maintain our compassion?

Mindfulness

Mindfulness as defined by Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G.) is "paying attention moment to moment to what is." Aren't we always paying attention moment to moment to what is? It is true that we are always paying attention to something. However, that something may be in the past (memories) or in the future (anticipation). In other words, we are totally wrapped up in our own mental world. The what is that I am referring to is the what is of the present. What is going on right now with our six senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, bodily feeling, and thinking).

How can we shift into mindfulness as a frequent daily practice?

Take a moment to reflect on this.

Some thoughts on how we can become mindful:

We make it a habit, just like we learn to brush our teeth twice a day.

We create reminders to reinforce this habit. For example, each time we enter a room, we ask ourselves, "What is going on right now?"

We remain curious and inquire.
We observe our thoughts and bodily sensations.
Jon Kabat Zinn and others call this “awarenessing”.

Compassion

Compassion is the intention to relieve the suffering of others. It arises with the recognition of the universality of suffering and the realization that all living beings desire happiness. Bhante G. defined compassion as “the melting of the heart at the thought of another’s suffering.” It can also be the melting of the heart at that thought of your suffering.

How can mindfulness help us develop more compassion for ourselves and others?

Take a moment and inquire as to how mindfulness can build and maintain our compassion.

One of the speakers, Kelly McGonigal, PhD presented a talk on the Science of Compassion. She noted that:

- Mindfulness can get you in touch with compassion.
- It can get you to noticing suffering.
Mindfulness is supportive of compassion.
- Mindfulness is remembering what is important.
- Mindfulness as a quality of attention that helps you to direct or enact your values.

Some thoughts on the link between mindfulness and compassion:

1. Mindfulness allows us to pay attention to the present (moment to moment) and in the present, we can become aware of the what is - that we are in a trance (stuck in our minds), focusing on the plight of ourselves and shutting out the world.
2. With mindfulness, we become aware of our suffering.
3. With mindfulness, we become aware of our bodily sensations that accompany our suffering.
4. With mindfulness, we become more aware of others and their suffering.
5. With mindfulness, we can be empathetic (taking the perspective of and feeling the emotions of another person.)
6. With mindfulness, we can start to investigate.

How can we practice mindfulness to build and maintain our compassion?

There is a five-step process of self compassion:

1. **Be mindful:** We become aware that we are experiencing difficulties.
2. **Pause and breathe:** Get centered.
3. **Investigate:** We investigate through observing the thoughts and bodily sensations that have arisen.
4. **Give Loving Kindness:** We respond with kindness and understanding for ourselves rather than being harshly self-critical.
5. **Realize connectedness:** We realize that what we are going through is commonly experienced by all human beings and that everyone goes through difficult times.ⁱⁱ

There is five-step process of compassion

1. **Be mindful:** We become aware of another experiencing difficulties.
2. **Pause and breathe:** Get centered.
3. **Investigate:** We investigate through empathy (taking the perspective of and feelings the emotions of another person.) Asking the question, “What do they really need?” leads to “What can I do to help?”. Pause and try to see through the other person’s eyes.ⁱⁱⁱ
4. **Give Compassion:** We respond with compassion. We might repeat the phrases
 - a. May you find safety, **even in the midst of pain (or misfortune, difficulties).**
 - b. May you find peace, **even in the midst of pain.**
 - c. May you find strength, **even in the midst of pain.**
 - d. May you find ease, **even in the midst of pain.**Pause and see what else arises to say or do.
5. **Realize connectedness:** We realize that what another is going through is commonly experienced by all human beings and that everyone goes through difficult times.^{iv}

A Heart Compassion Practice^v

Try heart breathing by breathing in and out of your chest as if your nostrils were on your chest. Breathe in compassion for yourself and breathe out compassion for the other person. You’re validating their pain and their struggle. Imagine yourself with the other. Compassion in and compassion out. In for you and out for them.

Summary

to practice mindfulness frequently, you must create ways to make it a habit. As a result, Jon Kabat-Zinn notes: “It gets to I am not practicing mindfulness but mindfulness is practicing me.” With mindfulness comes compassion for yourself and others. A great benefit for all!

ⁱ <https://www.theawakenetwork.com/>

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Neff, Kristen Self-Compassion The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself

ⁱⁱⁱ Brach, Tara Radical Acceptance p. 227

^{iv} Adapted from Neff, Kristen Self-Compassion The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself

^v Adapted from Kelly McGonigal and Kristin Neff’s talks