

The case for greater

Compassion + Self-Compassion

in the workplace



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Compassion

I have talked extensively in recent years about how compassion is essential for cultivating Psychological Safety in the workplace and empowering people to feel safe to take interpersonal risks (such as asking for help, suggesting ideas, raising concerns or admitting to mistakes without fear of negative repercussions). Compassion is paramount if leaders wish to cultivate trust and allow teams to flourish. Yet, many of the workplaces that exist today lack compassion. Often, it is because we are so caught up in the matters that seem urgent to us (such as urgent deadlines and overflowing email inboxes), that we don't stop and take the time to truly connect with others. Yet it is our inter-relatedness that helps us to thrive.

Research has shown that we have a tendency to make snap judgements about other people. We will often judge people based on their actions, without considering the relevant context. Conversely, when we find ourselves exhibiting similar behaviours, we have a tendency to judge ourselves based on our intentions. The problem with making such snap judgements is that we are often far too quick to blame others and believe it is some inherent flaw in their character, rather than the specific situation they find themselves in. This can often lead to us to make poor decisions and assumptions about people, which can damage our ability to connect with people and our existing relationships.

It may be easy to label someone as being impatient or unkind when they shout at you or fail to recognise your efforts - an inherent character trait, which is seen as more permanent. Yet, it may simply be that they shouted at you because they were tired or overworked - a temporary situation. When we are able to see the broader context that may have led someone to act the way that they did, it can actually help alleviate the negative stress we might have otherwise experienced in that moment. That is not to say that some people aren't impatient or unkind. There is always the possibility that someone may be an idiot, but assuming positive intent actually helps us feel better in the moment. It also helps us to better perceive someone else's pain and take steps to help alleviate that pain, rather than turn away from it or make it worse.

Where empathy and altruism collide

A common definition of compassion is as follows: Being confronted with another's suffering and feeling motivated to relieve their suffering. There are essentially three components to compassion: (i) noticing, (ii) feeling and (iii) responding (with kindness). Noticing requires us to be mindful, to be present and aware that other people may be suffering in that moment. Feeling requires us to actively experience what the other person may be feeling, otherwise known as empathy. Finally, responding requires us to take appropriate steps to help alleviate the other person's suffering.

I tend to think of compassion as empathy and altruism colliding. Empathy incorporates components (i) and (ii) and altruism component (iii). For compassion to be engaged all three components must be present. It is not sufficient to simply notice and experience someone else's suffering, you actively need to take steps to alleviate it. Similarly, being kind to someone because you happen to like making kind gestures rather than it being in response to someone's suffering does not constitute compassion.

The evolutionary roots of compassion

If you have ever found yourself with a group of friends in hysterics, you will no doubt be familiar with how contagious laughter can be. It turns out that the reason laughing can be so contagious is due, in part, to a type of neuron known as a mirror neuron. Mirror neurons essentially mirror the behaviours and emotions that we observe in others. They are activated both when we perform a certain action and when we observe someone else performing that same action. According to research, approximately 10-15% of the neurons in specific regions of our brain are mirror neurons, including the anterior insula and the anterior cingulate cortex, which are thought to play a significant role in our ability to experience what other people are feeling.

Interestingly, fMRI scans of the brain show that there is significant overlap between experiencing physical pain and emotional pain. Research suggests that emotional pain can hurt just as much as physical pain, which helps explain why rejection can often feel like we have been, quite literally, punched in the gut. One study found that taking pain killers for three weeks actually limited the negative feelings of those who had experienced social rejection. Empathy lights-up similar areas of the brain (the anterior insula and the anterior cingulate cortex) as when we experience our own physical or emotional pain. Essentially, both our own emotional pain and other people's emotional pain can hurt.

Scientists posit that mirror neurons would have conferred a significant benefit in helping us to understand and socialise with other humans. It appears that, as a species, we have evolved to care for and be cared for by others. Trust and collaboration within our tribe would have been important factors in our survival as a species. Relating to other people's physical and emotional pain would have helped cement those social bonds. This school of thought helps to explain why we likely developed biological mechanisms, such as mirror neurons to help us feel other people's pain. Similarly, the production of hormones such as oxytocin likely evolved to help promote pro-social feelings such as compassion, and compel us to take positive action to help fellow tribe members.

Common barriers to compassion

It appears abundantly clear that we thrive when we feel like we belong and are cared for by those in our tribe. Studies have shown that the release of oxytocin reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol in our system and helps to promote collaboration and a sense of belonging. We know from research into Psychological Safety, that when people feel safe, they are more likely to collaborate, innovate and learn. Patients recovering from surgery have also been found to heal more quickly when supported by a loved one. However, our evolutionary biology can often find itself at odds with today's society – one that has a tendency to cultivate fear, division, judgement and competition rather than social cohesion and collaboration.

As discussed at the beginning of this note, we can be extremely quick to judge others and assign it to an inherent character flaw. We have an inherent bias to want to quickly and efficiently differentiate friend from foe. Classifying people into binary categories likely helped us stay safe a hundred thousand years ago. However, the world we live in today is no longer binary. It is highly unlikely that the stranger walking towards you is a foe from an opposing tribe (unless you happen to be in a criminal gang).

We're often encouraged to think of people in a binary fashion, playing to our inherent biases. Politicians have repeatedly sought to de-humanise groups of individuals by likening them to parasites or vermin. Unfortunately, it often works and inhibits our ability to experience compassion. Research has found that when someone labels someone as 'homeless' (devoid of any other human traits), fMRI scans show that their brain reacts as if the person was in fact an inanimate object.

Another key barrier to compassion, which is unfortunately highly prevalent in today's workplaces, is negative stress. Research has found that when we are in a heightened state of fight or flight, our ability to empathise with others is significantly impaired. In one study, those who were given a stress hormone blocking agent, saw their levels of empathy return to normal, demonstrating how stress hormones impair our ability to empathise. Thinking about it from an evolutionary perspective, it does make sense. Thousands of years ago, if you were in fight or flight, your life would have been in danger - it would make sense to prioritise self-preservation over anything else.

Unfortunately, the competitive nature of the industries we have created, means we find ourselves moving against each other rather than moving towards one another. Ironically, research has found that this negatively impacts both the individuals involved and the organisations themselves. When we focus on our own pain and stop noticing other people's pain, we inadvertently isolate ourselves. We start to believe that we are the only ones suffering or are indifferent to others' suffering. Research has shown that there is solace to be found in relating to our common humanity – our shared human experience.

How to cultivate greater compassion

There are plenty of things we can do to cultivate greater compassion towards others. The very first step is to cultivate greater present moment awareness, to enable us to step outside of our own heads and connect with others. As part of that we need to cultivate our active listening skills. Active listening requires us to simply listen to someone, without pre-judgement or attempting to identify solutions to the challenges they may be facing. You should ask open questions and be attentive to their response.

Kindness

A second important way to cultivate greater compassion is to be kind. It may sound obvious, but most of us are so engrossed in our own trials and tribulations that we often forget to do the small things that can make a huge difference. More junior employees regularly complain about not receiving enough positive encouragement from supervisors. Simple things such as giving positive feedback can make a huge difference to someone's sense of competence and overall engagement. Even a smile can leave a lasting positive effect on someone.

Research has found that, as a result of mirror neurons, we absorb other people's emotions. One study found that even watching a character in a video experiencing a stressful event, resulted in 24% of those watching the video also experiencing heightened levels of cortisol in their system. Stress can be contagious, together with its negative impact on our levels of compassion, on our performance and on our wellbeing. On the flip side, kindness is known to have similar ripple effects - people who witness random acts of kindness are more likely to undertake a random act of kindness themselves.

An act of kindness could be as simple as smiling and saying hello to the receptionist on your way into the office. Have you considered incorporating kindness into your 1-2-1s or group meetings, starting your meetings with a thank you to recognise someone's contribution? When you notice someone else is struggling, do you check-in on them or offer to go for coffee with them to see if they are ok? The great thing is, kindness produces positive emotions in both the person receiving the kindness and the person being kind – it's a selfish good deed.

Look beyond the headline

Your brain will be very quick to want to fit someone neatly into a box and label them. If we want to cultivate greater compassion, we need to remember to take a step back and look beyond the headline that our brain may have created. The people we dislike or are fearful of are human beings just like us. They have their own fears and aspirations. They will be someone's son or daughter; they may even be a parent or a grandparent. They'll likely have hobbies, interests, likes and dislikes. The problem is, when all we see is a headline, we fail to connect with them as a human being.

Looking beyond the headline can be helpful earlier in someone's career too. It can often seem like the managing partner or CEO of an organisation is an intangible entity that we cannot relate to. Yet, they are a human being just like us and will have experienced set-backs and disappointments just like we will in our careers.

Be inspired

I have already talked about how kindness can have a ripple effect. It is for that reason that I pro-actively seek out examples of other people demonstrating kindness and compassion towards others. They inspire me to be a better version of myself. Observing acts of kindness also makes us feel good. It's therefore important to try and appreciate kindness and compassion when you notice it.

The compelling case for greater compassion in the workplace

I believe there is a compelling case for workplaces to foster greater compassion. People who feel cared for are known to be more engaged, more loyal, experience less sickness absence and demonstrate greater discretionary effort amongst many other things. People who foster compassion also increase their emotional intelligence enabling them to better relate to other people. This has positive implications beyond the immediate workplace, including with clients.

Compassion can also help create greater Psychological Safety. If someone is underperforming at work it can be really easy to fall into the trap of thinking it is an inherent competency issue. However, there is a fairly significant possibility that they are experiencing emotional distress, which is negatively impacting their wellbeing and performance. Perhaps they are experiencing overwhelm, problems at home or bullying in the workplace. It may be financial issues or health concerns. All of these things can adversely undermine wellbeing and, with it, performance. Without compassion we might be quick to dismiss that person and label them as an underperformer and fail to offer them the support that they need. Rarely are things as black and white as they first appear. Learning to listen to the concerns and challenges of others and offering support, is crucial to creating an environment where people feel safe to speak up.

Self-Compassion

There are some common character traits that lawyers tend to share, and which research suggests place them at an increased risk of mental ill-health. One of those traits is perfectionism. Research published earlier this year found that every generation of young adults since the late 1980s is more prone to perfectionism than previous generations and it appears that the legal profession has an even larger proportion of them. Perfectionism is defined as the tendency to set unrealistically high standards for oneself.

There is nothing inherently unhealthy about setting high standards and seeking to work hard and be committed to accomplishing great things. However, the waters get much murkier when someone is seeking to attain, what an objective bystander would term as, unrealistically high standards. Perfectionism is almost always accompanied by harsh self-criticism when someone inevitably fails to achieve the standards that they have set for themselves.

For many of us, when we make a mistake, self-criticism is often our default response. The voice in our heads that tells us that we are ‘useless’ or ‘worthless’ or that we are ‘never going to amount to anything unless we pull our socks up’. Surely, having such a coach on the side-lines, spurring us on, will make us perform better in the future? Many of us believe that self-criticism demonstrates our commitment to the highest possible standards.

If you had asked me 10 years ago how best to motivate myself, I suspect that ‘self-criticism’ would have featured fairly high up the list. If someone had suggested I take a kinder approach to my setbacks or failures I probably would have laughed. Surely the only way to achieve the high standards that I had set for myself was to hold myself accountable by criticising my shortcomings. That would ensure I didn’t fall short again. It is certainly true that we don’t like the feeling of being criticised. Criticism is painful. It feels bad, regardless of who is dishing it out. Yet, it would be a mistake to believe that self-criticism motivates us to keep moving forward.

Criticism hurts

When we criticise ourselves, the emotional pain we experience lights up the same pain centres of the brain as physical pain, namely the anterior insula and the anterior cingulate cortex. As a result of this overlap in neural circuitry, when our inner critic runs rampant inside our head, it can feel as if someone has quite literally punched us in the gut. Only, rather than a critical stranger, we are the ones inflicting the pain. In an effort to protect ourselves, we trigger fight or flight – the very same mechanism that we call upon to help us defend ourselves from a predator. Only, in the case of self-criticism, we are both the predator and the prey.

Whereas the threat from an actual predator usually dissipates within minutes or hours, our self-criticism can last for days, months or an entire lifetime, slowly eroding our self-worth, self-confidence and our sense of safety. Yet, if we cannot find sanctuary in our own mind, where will we ever find refuge from the critical world that we find ourselves in? As a result (and contrary to popular belief), self-criticism has been shown to have a negative effect on our long-term motivation. Our inner critic effectively undermines our self-esteem and, with it, our motivation to persevere.

A different approach to failure

Research into self-compassion shows that those who are able to cultivate greater compassion towards themselves, counterintuitively end up holding themselves to a higher standard and perform better than those who criticise themselves. A self-compassionate response has been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, stress, perfectionism, shame and pain. It has also been shown to increase life satisfaction, happiness, optimism, body appreciation and immune function.

Part of the reason is due to the fact that self-compassion doesn't induce our fight or flight response – so there is no longer the fear of beating ourselves up if things go wrong. Instead, we tap into our parasympathetic nervous system, mediated by our mammalian caregiving system (also known as our tend and befriend response). It works by triggering the release of hormones such as oxytocin, which help to promote feelings of warmth towards ourselves and relieve any stress we may be experiencing. We become our greatest ally.

Cultivating greater self-compassion

When it comes to cultivating greater self-compassion towards our self, there is no silver bullet. It begins with mindful self-awareness of those moments when we are experiencing pain or suffering and learning to catch ourselves from mindlessly chastising ourselves. The second step is to be kind. A simple exercise that you can do to cultivate greater kindness towards yourself, which is an exercise from the Mindful Self-Compassion programme developed by Chris Germer and Kristin Neff, is set out below.

1. Think of a behaviour that you are keen to change and that is currently causing you problems. What happens when you display that behaviour? Do you get defensive? Do you close down?
2. What does the voice of your inner critic tell you? What words does it use? What tone does it use? How does it express itself?
3. Now get in touch with the part of you that feels criticised. What impact do those critical words have on you? How do they make you feel?
4. Finally, can you think of a kinder more compassionate way of acknowledging your pain in that moment? Imagine it was a close friend who had been berating themselves for a similar transgression, what would you say to them to help comfort them in that moment? Can you use similar words to comfort yourself?

Lastly, it can be really helpful to harness our common humanity. Reminding ourselves that we are not alone in moments of suffering can be a huge comfort. Humans are imperfect beings and all of us will have experienced setbacks and sorrow in our lifetimes. Reminding ourselves of this fact can help soothe the pain we may be experiencing in that moment. The more often we practise self-compassion the quieter our inner critic's voice will become.

Notes

Compassion

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