Can You Teach Compassion?

We all want to be treated with compassion, but can we be compassionate too? On Line Resource Posted Jan 22, 2014

We all know people in our lives who are very compassionate, and sadly, some who are really not. Some people seem to be very attentive to the needs and concerns of others, while others seem totally oblivious and uncaring towards all. Who would you rather be around?

Certainly we'd all like to live in a more compassionate world, wouldn't we? With so much pain, suffering, and distress out there who wouldn't want to live in a world where everyone is treated with great compassion as well as concern, care, and respect? We would likely all welcome compassionate behavior directed towards us but maybe we don't always act in a compassionate way towards others. Do you typically act towards others as you wish others would act towards you?

Of course many people can behave with compassion in some circumstances yet also behave without evidence of compassion in other circumstances. Compassionate behavior (like all human behavior) is complex in that often people act very differently under different circumstances. Additionally, we are all susceptible to "compassion fatigue" in that one can be overwhelmed by the needs and troubles of others to the point of becoming numb to suffering. For example, you may read the daily news that report so many horrors in the world without reacting with much emotion or concern since you get so used to these reports.





Source:

Many wonder if compassion can be taught or is it just inborn? Research on child development and temperament seems to suggest that some young children appear to be born more compassionate than others. Some are more attentive to the needs and concerns of others.

Yet research also suggests that compassion can be taught throughout the lifespan too. For example, research in my lab here at Santa Clara University has found that college students who attend service learning immersion trips spending a great time with those who are poor and marginalized in either domestic or international location do, in fact, become more compassionate (at least after their immersion experience and for several months later when assessed in follow up testing). We are currently examining a large university data set to determine which college activities (e.g., selected major, extracurricular activities) are associated with compassion development over time. Curiously, in some of our preliminary analyses we find that partying and alcohol consumption is negatively associated with compassion development.





Source:

Additional research in my lab and elsewhere also highlights the power of observational learning and modeling of compassion. We watch and learn from important others and do what they do. Often these models are close to home such as friends and family, co-workers, and so forth. Yet, we also value and observe the more famous models too. Perhaps one of reasons for the popularity of leaders such as the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis is their modeling of compassion. Collaborative research through our Spirituality and Health Institute (SHI) here at Santa Clara has found how important models can be in learning compassionate behavior.

So, compassion can be taught for sure. And if we want to live in a more compassionate world we need to both teach and model it to everyone. Will you do your part? So, what do you think?

Please check out my web site at <u>www.scu.edu/tplante</u> and follow me on Twitter @ThomasPlante

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