

# ***Compassion: Collateral Damage of Self-Preservation?***

**Ethics Café  
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**SOPHIA TOWN**  
**Community Psychological Services**

True or false: Compassion is a quality taken for granted in NGO/NPO services.

Perhaps we want to say it is true. However, how do we then make sense of so many experiences, as we go about our daily work, where a lack of compassion is evident?



Today, let's take a hard look at the idea that compassion may be collateral damage in trying to protect oneself from hard realities, lack of support or proper training, or societal messages that humanity has little worth.

## To start ...

Recall an instance when someone showed **compassion** to you.

- What did the person do that you experience as compassion?
- Define compassion

# Compassion defined

“sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it”

## What is the difference between *empathy* and *compassion*?

*Compassion* and *empathy* both refer to a caring response to someone else’s distress.

While *empathy* refers to an active sharing in the emotional experience of the other person, *compassion* adds to that emotional experience a desire to alleviate the person’s distress. ...

The distinction between *compassion* and *empathy* is frequently a topic of exploration.

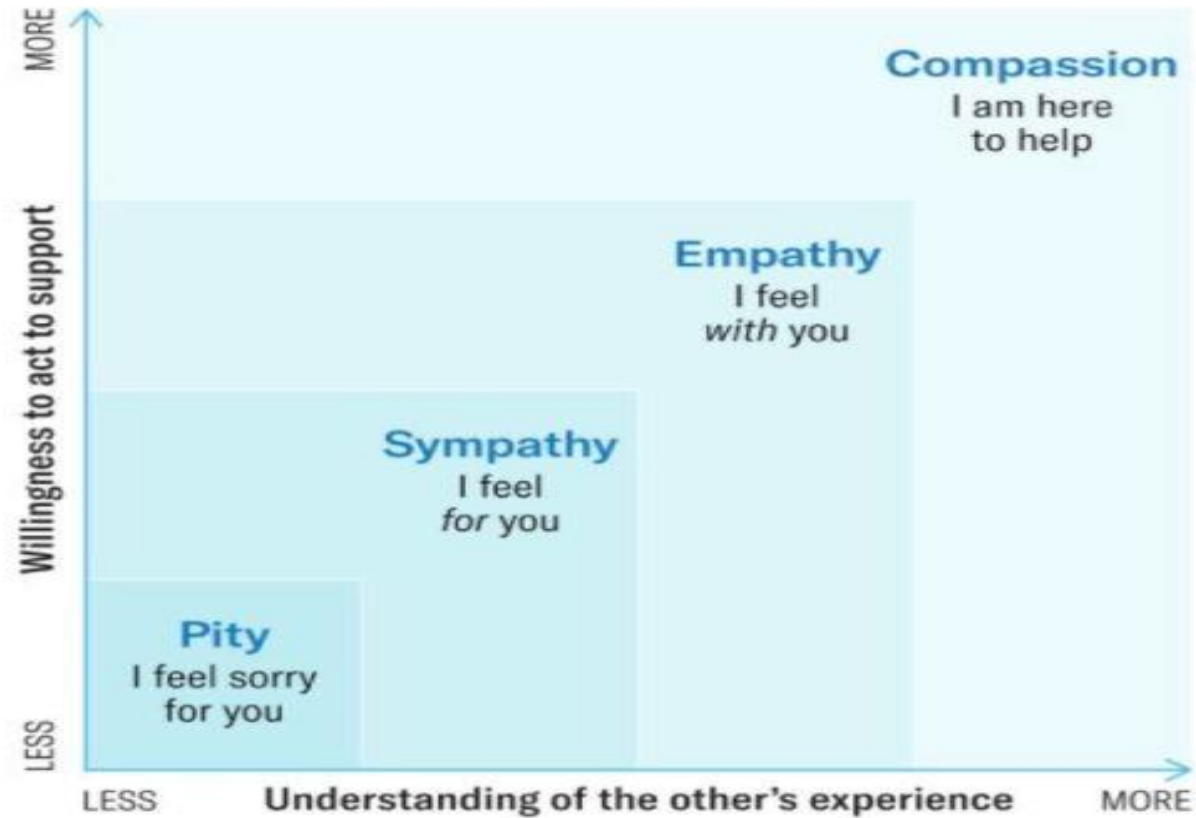
By empathy I mean feeling the feelings of other people. So if you’re in pain and I feel your pain—I am feeling empathy toward you. If you’re being anxious, I pick up your anxiety. If you’re sad and I pick up your sadness, I’m being empathetic. And that’s different from compassion. Compassion means I give your concern weight, I value it. I care about you, but I don’t necessarily pick up your feelings. ... [I]f I feel compassion for you, I’ll be invigorated. I’ll be happy and I’ll try to make your life better. — Paul Bloom, quoted in *Vox*, 16 Jan. 2019

*Compassion* is a much older word; it’s been part of the language since the 14th century, and comes ultimately from Latin *com-* and *pati*, meaning “to bear, suffer.” *Empathy* is a 20th century coinage modeled on *sympathy* as a translation of the German *Einfühlung* (“feeling-in” or “feeling into”). It was first applied in contexts of philosophy, aesthetics, and psychology and continues to have technical use in those fields.

- Merriam-Webster Dictionary

# Distinctions

## Compassion Goes Beyond Sympathy and Empathy



Source: Potential Project

HBR

# Compassion in the helping professions

Compassion is:

- motivation
- attitude
- feeling (complex & moral)
- aspect of quality of presence

The very nature of the helping professions is built on a foundation of concern about human suffering and trying to alleviate and prevent it, through direct responses and bringing about change in systems.

# Discussion in groups

## Stories to work with:

- *“As the person sits down and starts talking, you know that you have heard the story before ...”*
- *“You notice a colleague is coming to work late regularly, she is curt with clients ...”*
- *“It is early morning ... a mother has been killed in the street ...”*
- *“A child is at risk, and protection intervention is slow, as if others don't care ...”*

## What to do in your groups:

- Each group works with one of the scenarios given (more detail on each scenario in hard copy scripts).
- Divide into two teams in each group.
- Each team formulates their scripted argument.
- Engage in discussion, and highlight objections to each others' arguments.

Compassion comes with

**Reward + Cost**





# Compassion as an ethics theme


<b>Character Ethics</b> (Virtue Ethics)	A good person will to show compassion to another who is in need and suffering. What kind of a person does not show compassion to another in need?
<b>Ubuntu</b>	Care and concern for the well-being of others, a mindset of compassion, is a way of life and thinking.
<b>Human Rights</b>	Recognise that every human being is of equal moral worth, that a human rights framework helps us to prevent and alleviate human suffering caused by injustice, inequality, and a lack of freedom.
<b>Care Ethic</b>	Compassion drives caring for those who are vulnerable in our society and who may not be able to fully speak up for their own needs and rights.
<b>Ethics of Duty</b>	We have a duty not to harm others, by implication recognising that causing suffering is morally wrong. We have a duty to try to prevent and alleviate suffering, perhaps not fully and in all respects, but as a direction in life.

# Your conclusion:

Is ...

To what  
extent...

What is the risk  
of ...



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# Where does this leave us?

## Self-responsibility & measures

- Professional development
- Supervision
- Team approach
- Knowing your 'capacity budget'
- Take responsibility for self-compassion

## Organisational responsibility & measures

- Healthy workplace culture
- Reasonable expectations
- Resource management
- Processing opportunities
- Learning opportunities
- Duty of care

# Closing



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