

The integrating theme of Resilience is connection. Without connection, determination and courage cannot bring joy or a better world. We live in a connected world and we are better for it. The intersection of neurobiology, meditative practice and health is showing us the power and plasticity of empathy and compassion. With the festive season being a celebration of connection, this Resilience Insight invokes an open heart. The evidence for this is compelling and the personal benefits dramatic. Everyone wins – even business.

Open Heart in Context

As an individual your potential is vast. Humans can exist at very enlightened levels but we can also frequently drop into the suffering of the death spiral. Our [Resilience Diagnostic](#) model helps us map this range of human functioning. Resilience engages the knowledge, attitudes and skills of altitude

An open heart takes us all upwards.

Four perspectives guide us to build Resilience: insight (self awareness), mastery (self efficacy), empathy (social awareness), and influence (meaningful impact). Open heart addresses all four – first, in the domain of self and second in the world of others.



Defining the language

What do we mean when talking about empathy and compassion? Empathy is the ability to read and attune accurately – an awareness function. Compassion is being active with purpose. Compassion is a motivated desire to relieve suffering and secure positive outcomes – peace, wellbeing, happiness and success. It has also been called altruism – the impulse to help others even at a cost to yourself.

In the case of self, the goal is to be attuned to self with acceptance and kindness. This is a direct counter to our tendency to be self-critical. Self-compassion, a term now widely used, means that we are motivated to relieve our suffering and seek joy.

With regard to others, empathy is the ability to read another person. We take their view. It is awareness but not necessarily action. Compassion is a prosocial skill of influence – the desire and ability to relieve suffering and enrich the lives of others.

On Empathy

Empathy is the ability to access a set of neurobiological circuits that allow us to focus on others, interpret physical, emotional and cognitive cues, and appreciate the point of view of others. This is a complex, multifaceted process involving disparate parts of the brain. The goal is to collect and process enough accurate information to feel with or empathise with the other. We can empathise with both joy and suffering.

Frans de Waal describes this as an empathy portal. For some the empathy portal is wide open. Others seem tuned out. If tired, distressed or self-absorbed, we may not be able to switch our attention to others. This is normal. Autism is a failure of the empathy circuits – portal closed. Men close the portal easier than women.

Oxytocin, known as the birth and nursing hormone, increases prosocial behaviour. Delivered to the brain as an intranasal spray, oxytocin increases generosity, feelings of trust, eye contact, facial

expression reading, and empathic concern. Oxytocin also counters the distress reaction – and helps men empathise more like women.

Empathy goes too far when it becomes sympathy. When we open to the suffering of others research shows that it is deeply distressing to both brain and physiology. We suffer with the other person reducing our ability to take skilful action. We take short cuts to relieve our own suffering which does not help –or may even harm – others.

We can all learn how to train the empathy portal. This is the calm, focus and connect process we encourage at The Resilience Institute. There is evidence that intranasal oxytocin may help those with autism, low empathy and social anxiety. Positive emotion facilitates an open portal.

Practice

Calming allows us to cool the distress response and activate the vagal brake (parasympathetic tone). It prepares us to attend to others and protects us from the sympathy trap. Refresh between meetings, breathe out and soften your face.

Focusing is the deliberate switching of attention to the other person. We will notice cues in face, posture, tone of voice and breathing and let the other person know we are dialled in. Remove distractions, face others and direct your gaze respectfully.

Connecting is the maintenance of a two-way biological dialogue called resonance – a flow of expressions, movements, pulse, and breath synchrony. This is the connection we all long for. Nod, smile, affirm, stay focused and maintain your calm.

For some of us family hugs, regular massage and other forms of close physical contact that stimulate oxytocin activity will open the empathy portal.

In summary, empathy is learning, understanding and connecting. It has upside when used with skill and is a burnout risk if it collapses into sympathy.

The fascinating outcome of multiple studies is that a lifetime of compassion delivers what Davidson calls Olympic athletes of the mind.

Towards Compassion

Compassion, or love in action, is motivation to help in skilled and constructive ways. Sympathy is active but is

neither skilled nor constructive. The neural circuits of compassion are very different to empathy. Tania Singer's research shows that empathy alone can deplete us and cause negative emotion. However, when we activate compassion we feel resourceful and happy. The brain responds in a more healthy and effective way. As a consequence we help with greater skill.

The fascinating outcome of multiple studies is that a lifetime of compassion delivers what Davidson calls Olympic athletes of the mind. The brains of monks in the studies are remarkably more effective and efficient than most of us. Attention, flexibility, emotion regulation and just outright happiness are “off the charts.”

Singer and others show that novices can activate the early stages of this high-performing brain within a few weeks of practice. Subjectively they claim remarkably higher levels of wellbeing and happiness. Objectively they show improved immune function, reduced inflammation, improved health indicators, higher vagal tone, and improved cognition.

Interestingly you don't actually have to do anything for others to feel the benefits. The research is based on people lying in a scanner and generating a desire to liberate suffering and bring joy.

Practice

Loving kindness meditation means generating compassionate feelings and intentions for self, close family, friends, and then to all sentient beings. From the perspective of measurable benefit to the brain, it trumps other forms of meditation.

Random acts of kindness are practical actions. Studies show us that we can “be good by doing good”. Leave the cave and help people. Resolve to spend a few minutes a day doing good – pick up litter, offer to help and say nice things.

Work for the benefit of others by crafting a career that makes a positive difference. It challenges our anxiety to be economically viable yet the personal benefits are huge. Conscious capitalism is committed to both good work and profit. The growth of the not for profit work is another option.

Even if we can't influence our business, we can always strive to work with kindness.

Love Rocks

Most religions have strong underpinnings of love. Doctrines of hate, violence and disrespect of self and others are fortunately rare.

However we get there, there is no doubt that kindness and actions of care are good for us and for others. The payback makes for a good business case:

1. We do less damage to those we interact with and depend upon
2. We do less damage to our bodies, emotions and mind
3. We can savour the joy of being able to make a difference to others
4. We can enjoy the subjective benefits of kindness to self
5. We will become healthier and can make others healthier
6. We feel calmer and happier and do the same for others

7. Our minds work better and we can resolve complex challenges
8. Leadership, teamwork and customer service are enabled.

Invoking love in your life

We are naturally anxious, defensive, judgemental and selfish. Invoking an open heart requires a clear understanding of the territory and the goal.

- Empathy that enables learning and connecting is good.
- Sympathy – too much empathy – can cause distress and is unhelpful.
- Compassion is a desire to bring peace, love and joy to others and it works
- Skilful actions that relieve suffering and build joy in self and others are good

Calm Presence (master stress)

Whether we achieve this through meditation, biofeedback, breathing or optimal hormones the first practice goal is a stable, attentive mind.

Self-Compassion (energise body)

The foundation is a gentle and accepting view of self. When attuned to our feelings, we open the door to impulse control and emotional positivity. We enable constructive self-care, sensible lifestyles and wellbeing rather than short-term gratification.

Loving Kindness (engage emotion)

When we accept and care for ourselves, we extend love with generosity rather than as a trade for favours. A helpful practice is to silently say “peace, love and joy to you” each time you pass someone in the daily press of life.

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Skilful Action (train mind)

This is the call of humanity, our embedded altruism and the advice of science. Whether it’s a generous smile, tenderness to family, random acts of kindness, or heroic leadership is up to you. The call is to get started immediately.

Gratitude and Awe (spirit in action)

We are all part of a living planet. A closed heart will continue to destroy habitats, eliminate species and threaten human life. Taking moments to appreciate the elements of our natural world with gratitude and awe for the magnificent miracle of life on earth is the enabler of a noble path for our species.

References

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