



## **Cultivating Compassionate Community**

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From conception, we belong to community. Attachment to our clan is a biological necessity. We are wired to connect—and our bonds are crucial not only for security and survival—but also to thrive and for our well-being.

Compassion is an essential element of a healthy community. It's the awareness of suffering, and subsequent actions to alleviate the suffering. The absence of compassion in a community contributes to heightened chronic stress at an individual and group level. Its presence reduces stress and allows its members to flourish.

### **Oxytocin's Role in Compassion**

The beings nearest and dearest to us are the natural focus of our compassion and its healing qualities of support, kindness, and care. We do not automatically extend compassion to those outside the sphere of our community. Research indicates that the hormone oxytocin plays an interesting role: it facilitates compassion to members identified as part of our tribe, and enhances a non-compassionate defensiveness to members identified as outsiders. Researchers have suggested re-characterizing oxytocin as the “tribal hormone” rather than as the “love hormone”. [1]

The complex and negative effects of human tribalism become more apparent as technology connects all of humanity with the click of a mouse. Is it possible for us to collectively honor and maintain the uniqueness of our respective clans, while simultaneously expanding the reach of compassion to one and all?

The answer is simple: we have the capacity to consciously recognize and feel our “common humanity” without denying our differences. Life has evolved a human mind/brain that provides us with the ability to put ourselves in the shoes of others, even those outside of our community or tribe. We can identify with our common human similarities rather than emphasize our differences.

Connecting with our commonality involves consciously and intentionally extending our tribal identification to all of humanity. The researchers wondered whether practicing “universal compassion” might trigger the production of oxytocin that would facilitate more compassion for all people. This is certainly a hypothesis worth testing—the collective task of consciously activating human compassion towards all is one of our most urgent tasks for humankind to flourish. The risk in not doing this will contribute to the demise of our emerging worldwide human community.

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## **Breathing Compassion In and Out [2]**

Try this universal compassion practice on your own. Consider practicing for around 5-10 minutes once a day for a week before evaluating if you feel the positive effects of more kindness, caring, soothing, and support. If it feels beneficial, then form an intention to continue practicing for the benefit of one and all.

- 1 Sit or lie down in a comfortable posture
- 2 Take a few deep and relaxing diaphragmatic breaths
- 3 Sense the body by scanning from head to toes and then up from toes to the head, especially recognizing any stress in the body and noting its location and quality
- 4 Bring your attention to the region of the heart, and recognize the presence of any emotions, especially stressful ones. While recognizing the presence of stress, slowly take three deep breaths: with each inhale, bring into each cell of the body qualities of compassion: let yourself feel support, kindness, soothing, and caring
- 5 With the next set of gentle and deep breaths, continue generating compassion for yourself while inhaling and, as you exhale, send out compassion to another living being, maybe to a being connected with any discomfort you recognized earlier. Take a few more breaths.
- 6 Begin to align your exhales with compassion and expand your focus to all living beings. Give yourself permission to sense the soothing, caring, and supportive kindness you are drawing into your body while inhaling compassion, and also the kindness you are sending out to all beings while exhaling
- 7 Allow your breathing to return to a natural depth and rhythm while continuing to inhale compassion for yourself and exhale compassion to others. Your attention will naturally wander. When you notice this, gently bring your attention back to the breath while inhaling compassion for yourself and exhaling compassion to others.
- 8 When you stop the practice, bathe yourself for a time in the loving silence you have generated.

Remember that you can shorten the practice, and create and share heartfelt, compassionate, loving kindness for yourself, and to your community at any time, anywhere.

### Citations

[1] Mind your Hormones! The Endocrinology of Compassion, by Jennifer S. Mascaró, Thaddeus W. W. Pace, Charles L. Raison, p. 235, in *Compassion: Bridging Practice and Science*, Tania Singer and Matthias Bolz, eds., E-Book Edition, Max Planck Society, Munich, Germany, 2013; free download available at <http://www.compassion-training.org/>

[2] [http://www.mindfulnesscompassion.org/meditations\\_downloads.php](http://www.mindfulnesscompassion.org/meditations_downloads.php)

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