COMPASSION MEDITATION

Difficulty: MODERATE  |  Frequency: 1X/DAY  |  Duration: 10 MINS

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Having compassion means that you want others to be free from suffering and you have the urge to help end their suffering. It is not only vital to a kind and just society but also, research suggests, a path to better health and stronger relationships.

Yet cultivating compassion for others—and yourself—can sometimes feel like an emotionally taxing and demanding task. This exercise walks you through a meditation grounded in simple techniques—paying attention to your breath and guided imagery—to help you nurture compassion toward a loved one, yourself, a neutral person, and even an enemy.

TIME REQUIRED

10 minutes daily

HOW TO DO IT

This practice, led by Eve Ekman LCSW, PhD guides you to reflect upon feelings of tenderness and nurturance to strengthen compassion.

We recommend listening to audio of this guided meditation in the player below.

To help you follow it yourself or to teach it to others, we have provided a script for this guided meditation below.

As we begin this practice, find a position—seated, laying down, or standing up—where you feel comfortable. Balance this feeling of comfort and relaxation alongside a sense of purpose, even dignity, to the session which is about to come.

Begin by noticing the sensations of breath as they travel in gently through the nostrils. Continue noticing as they travel out again through the nostrils. Inhale, noticing sensations of breath. Exhale, noticing sensations of breath.

To further stabilize our attention, we can count breaths. At the very top of the inhale, just before the exhale, silently, to yourself, count one and upwards until 10. If at any point in the counting, you become spaced out or distracted, simply return to the counting, starting again at one.

Release this practice of counting. We'll now shift the attention to the mind and to imagination. In this practice of compassion, we're going to focus on our own simple ability to hold another person with care, with gentleness, with friendliness.

We start this practice in a simple way, bringing to mind someone who it's easy to feel care for. This could be a colleague at work that's also a friend or someone we've had enjoyable and positive experiences with. As we bring this person to mind, we may naturally feel a smile across our lips or a sense of warmth or openness at our chest.

As we hold this person in mind, imagining their face, we consider an intention of compassion and gentleness. This could simply be, I want this person to be happy. I want this person to overcome challenges and difficulties. Maybe we are aware of specific challenges or
difficulties this person is facing. Maybe we don't know the specifics. But, of course, like all humans, this person has their struggles and their challenges.

So again, imagining the face of this person who we enjoy and allowing our care for them to flow freely, imagining them happy. We envision that they have happiness, joy all the way through their difficulties and challenges. They're able to find resilience. And for a couple breaths, just notice what it's like to hold this person in kindness and care.

Visualizing with kindness in this way, it's as though we are doing preparation, strengthening for when this person might truly need us. Knowing that we can hold this person with caring kindness gives us the confidence to feel that when they are going through something, we know how to be present. We may not be able to fix or change the circumstances or context of what's hard for them, but we can rely on this ability of holding them with this kind, gentle, open presence.

Now that we've tried out this practice with someone who we enjoy, who it's easy to feel care for, we move on in our mind to someone at work who maybe we don't know as well, but who it's clear has some explicit challenges and struggles. Maybe there's difficulty in their home life. Maybe we're aware that at work, things are really hard.

Bring this person to mind, and bring their explicit struggles to mind. Again, imagine extending kindness and a wish for this person to find happiness, even amid the difficulties of their life. As we hold this person in mind, we also hold in mind this intention or aspiration of friendliness, gentleness. Again, this intention or aspiration will not change the circumstances of their life, but it allows us to be open, caring, and present with the difficulty.

Being present to the difficulty of others isn't necessarily something we have to learn. It's something we're naturally capable of. What can get in the way is feeling overwhelmed or as though there's nothing we can do. This practice—holding this person in mind with care—this is what we can do.

Release, now, the image and intention for this person and simply come back to focusing on the breath and then on the body. And we bring this practice to a close.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS


Adults in Wisconsin received either a 30 minute version of this compassion meditation training or a training aimed at mitigating negative emotion by helping people think differently about a negative event. Participants who completed two weeks of the compassion training demonstrated more altruism—they gave more money to a victim of unfair treatment. This altruistic behavior is a strong marker of compassion.

What’s more, the people who received the compassion training showed different brain activity in response to pictures of suffering: Their brains showed greater activity in regions known to be involved in understanding the suffering of others, regulating emotions, and experiencing positive feelings in response to a reward or goal. In this case, suggest the researchers, that goal was alleviating the suffering of someone in need.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

While there is no demographic information in Weng’s 2013 study, additional studies explore how this exercise benefits different groups and cultures:

- Portuguese adults who practiced compassion exercises such as Compassion Meditation and Best Possible Self for two weeks felt more positive emotions, experienced less shame and self-criticism, and maintained a more stable heart rate (a marker of reduced stress reactivity) compared to those on a waitlist.
- Adults in Hong Kong, including some with recurring anxiety and depression disorders, practiced Compassion Meditation as part of one- or two-month compassion and mindfulness programs. They increased in well-being and decreased in psychological distress immediately and three months after the programs.
- Asian American college students who engaged in Compassion Meditation as part of an eight-week course called “Using
Compassionate Meditation to Heal From Race-Related Stress” exhibited decreases in distress, anxiety, depression, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

- **Spanish adults** with borderline personality disorder in a three-week loving-kindness/compassion program that included Compassion Meditation reported less borderline personality disorder symptoms and self-criticism and more self-kindness and acceptance than those who engaged in dialectical behavioral therapy.
- **Houseless female trauma survivors** of interpersonal violence in the American Midwest with mental disorders and substance abuse history who attended a six-week program that included Compassion Meditation experienced reductions in trauma and clinical symptoms.

Compassion Meditation and its variations are included in several Buddhist-inspired programs that aim to improve well-being with various compassion exercises, including **Cognitively-Based Compassion Training** (CBCT, an eight- to ten-week course originally developed by Lobsang Tenzin Negi, using exercises such as Compassion Meditation and Mindful Breathing to foster mindfulness, self-compassion, compassion for others, and other prosocial emotions); **Compassion Cultivation Training** (CCT, an eight- or nine-week program developed by researchers at Stanford University that focuses on fostering compassion “for oneself, loved ones, difficult people, and all beings”); and **Compassionate Mind Training** (CMT, a central technique in Paul Gilbert’s Compassion-Focused Therapy designed to improve the mental health of people with high levels of shame and self-criticism). Research suggests that programs like these can benefit different groups and cultures:

- A racially diverse group of American veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder who participated in a 10-week CBCT program experienced more reductions in clinical symptoms than those who used a generic mental health program for veterans.
- Low-income African American adults who had recently attempted suicide attended a CBCT group across six weekly 90-minute sessions. Participants—especially those with high emotional reactivity—reported greater reductions in self-criticism, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation than adults in a support group.
- Breast cancer survivors in Arizona and Spain showed decreases in stress and mental health symptoms that lasted for up to six months after a standard eight-week CBCT program that required daily meditation practice.
- Chilean adults who attended a nine-week CCT program with weekly two-hour classes and 30 minutes of daily practice showed improvements in well-being and satisfaction with life.
- Mental health patients in Iceland who participated in a four-week CMT program with eight two-hour classes and home practice assignments experienced reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress.
- American women (mostly of African and Southeast Asian descent, who were currently, recently, or intending to become pregnant) who completed four CMT exercises that included Compassion Meditation showed larger reductions in depression and anxiety symptoms compared to those who completed cognitive behavioral therapy exercises.
- Persian college students and HIV-positive patients in Iran who attended a four-week CMT program showed increased levels of well-being and healthy emotional processes when compared with control groups.
- Japanese individuals with low self-esteem who engaged in at least 10 minutes of Compassion Meditation daily for a week during a seven-week, CMT-inspired program had beneficial changes in “self-esteem, negative thoughts, negative emotions, anxiety, depression, and shame.”
- Spanish breastfeeding mothers and Iranian mothers of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder who took part in at least 30 minutes of Compassion Meditation during six- to eight-week compassion programs experienced reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

**WHY TO TRY IT**

This meditation fosters feelings of compassion and concern for others by training people to notice suffering and strive to alleviate it, while at the same time giving people the emotional resources to not feel overwhelmed by the distress caused by that suffering. The researchers who used this compassion meditation in their work argue that the care for others emphasized by the compassion training may have caused participants to see suffering not as a threat to their own well-being but as an opportunity to reap the psychological rewards from achieving an important goal—namely, connecting with someone else and making that person feel better.

By first extending compassion to a loved one and to the self, it becomes easier to extend that same compassion to others, even those you may not like. Extending compassion to people you dislike can help to reduce feelings of hostility and resentment and may lead to improvements in a strained relationship. With practice, this meditation can help bring more peace, joy, and connection to one’s own life.
and to the lives of others.

SOURCES
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This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.