

COMPASSION MEDITATION

Difficulty: **INTENSIVE** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **30 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

30 minutes 3 times per week

HOW TO DO IT

This exercise draws on a guided meditation created by researcher Helen Weng and her colleagues at the Center for Healthy Minds (CHM) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Dr. Weng called this meditation a “compassion meditation,” though a similar kind of meditation is also referred to as a “loving-kindness meditation.”

We recommend listening to the audio of this guided meditation in the player below; you can also download it from the CHM's website. We have included a script of this meditation to help you follow it yourself or teach it to others. In brackets are the lengths of the pauses in the original guided meditation, to give you a sense of how much time to take for each step.

Settling

Welcome. We will soon begin the Compassion Meditation Session. Please settle into a comfortable position and allow yourself to relax.

Take a deep breath and release. [2 seconds] For a few moments, just focus on your breath and clear your mind of worries. Notice when you are breathing in ... and breathing out. Let yourself experience and be aware of the sensations of breathing. [10 seconds]

Loving-Kindness & Compassion for a Loved One

Picture someone who is close to you, someone toward whom you feel a great amount of love. Notice how this love feels in your heart.

Notice the sensations around your heart. Perhaps you feel a sensation of warmth, openness, and tenderness. [10 seconds]

Continue breathing, and focus on these feelings as you visualize your loved one. As you breathe out, imagine that you are extending a golden light that holds your warm feelings from the center of your heart. Imagine that the golden light reaches out to your loved one, bringing them peace and happiness. At the same time, silently recite these phrases.

May you have happiness.

May you be free from suffering.

May you experience joy and ease.

May you have happiness.

May you be free from suffering.

May you experience joy and ease.

[1 minute]

As you silently repeat these phrases, remember to extend the golden light to your loved one from your heart. Feel with all your heart that you wish your loved one happiness and freedom from suffering.

Compassion for a Loved One

Now think of a time when this person was suffering. Maybe they experienced an illness, an injury, or a difficult time in a relationship. [15 seconds]

Notice how you feel when you think of their suffering. How does your heart feel? Do the sensations change? Do you continue to feel warmth, openness, and tenderness? Are there other sensations, perhaps an aching sensation? [10 seconds]

Continue to visualize your loved one as you breathe. Imagine that you are extending the golden light from your heart to your loved one, and that the golden light is easing their suffering. Extend this light out to them during your exhalation, with the strong heartfelt wish that they be free from their suffering. Recite silently to them:

May you be free from this suffering.

May you have joy and happiness.

May you be free from this suffering.

May you have joy and happiness.

[1 minute]

Notice how this feels in your heart. What happened to your heart? Did the sensations change? Did you continue to feel warmth, openness, and tenderness? Were there other sensations, an aching sensation perhaps? Did you have a wish to take away the other's suffering? [30 seconds]

Compassion for Self

Contemplate a time when you have suffered yourself. Perhaps you experienced a conflict with someone you care about, or did not succeed in something you wanted, or were physically ill. [15 seconds]

Notice how you feel when you think of your suffering. How does your heart feel? Do you continue to feel warmth, openness, and tenderness? Are there other sensations, perhaps an aching sensation? [10 seconds]

Just as we wish for our loved one's suffering to end, we wish that our own suffering would end. We may also envision our own pain and suffering leaving us so that we may experience happiness.

Continue to visualize yourself as you breathe. Imagine that the golden light emanating from your heart is easing your suffering. With each exhalation, feel the light emanating within you, with the strong heartfelt wish that you be free from your suffering. Silently recite to yourself:

May I be free from this suffering.

May I have joy and happiness.
May I be free from this suffering.
May I have joy and happiness.
[2 minutes]

Again, notice how this feels in your heart. What kind of sensations did you feel? Did they change from when you were envisioning your own suffering? How is this feeling different from when you wished your loved one's suffering to be relieved? Did you feel warmth, openness, and tenderness? Were there other sensations such as pressure? Did you have a wish to take away your own suffering? [30 seconds]

Compassion for a Neutral Person

Now visualize someone you neither like nor dislike—someone you may see in your everyday life, such as a classmate with whom you are not familiar, a bus driver, or a stranger you pass on the street. [5 seconds]

Although you are not familiar with this person, think of how this person may suffer in their own life. This person may also have conflicts with loved ones, or struggle with an addiction, or may have suffered illness. Imagine a situation in which this person may have suffered. [30 seconds]

Notice your heart center. Does it feel different? Do you feel more warmth, openness, and tenderness? Are there other sensations, perhaps an aching sensation? How does your heart feel different from when you were envisioning your own or a loved one's suffering? [10 seconds]

Continue to visualize this person as you breathe. Imagine that you are extending the golden light from your heart to them, and that the golden light is easing their suffering. Extend this light out to them during your exhalation, with the strong heartfelt wish that they be free from suffering. See if this wish can be as strong as the wish for your own or a loved one's suffering to be relieved. Silently recite to them:

May you be free from this suffering.
May you have joy and happiness.
May you be free from this suffering.
May you have joy and happiness.
[2 minutes]

Again, notice how this feels in your heart. Did the sensations change from when you were envisioning this person's suffering? Did you continue to feel warmth, openness, and tenderness? Were there other sensations? Did you have a wish to take away this person's suffering? How were these feelings different from when you were wishing to take away your own or a loved one's suffering? [30 seconds]

Compassion for an Enemy

Now visualize someone with whom you have difficulty in your life. This may be a parent or child with whom you disagree, an ex, a roommate with whom you had an argument or a coworker with whom you do not get along. [5 seconds]

Although you may have negative feelings towards this person, think of how this person has suffered in their own life. This person has also had conflicts with loved ones, or has dealt with failures, or may have suffered illness. Think of a situation in which this person may have suffered. [30 seconds]

Notice your heart center. Does it feel different? Do you feel more warmth, openness, and tenderness? Are there other sensations, perhaps an aching sensation? How does your heart feel different from when you were envisioning your own or a loved one's suffering? [10 seconds]

Continue to visualize this person as you breathe. Imagine that you are extending the golden light from your heart to them, and that the golden light is easing their suffering. Extend this light out to them during your exhalation, with

the strong heartfelt wish that they be free from suffering. See if this wish can be as strong as the wish for your own or a loved one's suffering to be relieved. Silently recite to them:

May you be free from this suffering.
May you have joy and happiness.
May you be free from this suffering.
May you have joy and happiness.
[1 minute]

If you have difficulty in wishing for this person's suffering to be relieved, you may think of a positive interaction you have had with this person that can help you in wishing them joy and happiness. Perhaps there were times when you got along, laughed together, or worked well together on an assignment. Continue to silently recite:

May you be free from this suffering.
May you have joy and happiness.
[2 minutes]

Again, notice how this feels in your heart. Did the sensations change? Did you feel warmth, openness, and tenderness? How were these feelings different from when you were wishing for your own or a loved one's suffering to end? Were there other sensations, perhaps a tightness in the chest? Did you have a wish to take away this person's suffering? [30 seconds]

Compassion for All Beings

Now that we are almost at the end of this meditation, let's end with a wish for all other beings' suffering to be relieved. Just as I wish to have peace, happiness, and to be free from suffering, so do all beings. [10 seconds]

Now bask in the joy of this open-hearted wish to ease the suffering of all people and how this attempt brings joy, happiness, and compassion in your heart at this very moment.

You have now finished this compassion meditation session.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Weng, H. Y., Fox, A. S., Shackman, A. J., Stodola, D. E., Caldwell, J. Z., Olson, M. C., Rogers, G. M., and Davidson, R. J. (2013). [Compassion training alters altruism and neural responses to suffering](#). *Psychological Science*, 24(7), 1171-1180.

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

[Helen Weng, Ph.D.](#), University of California, San Francisco

[Center for Healthy Minds](#), University of Wisconsin, Madison

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](#).

