Compassion 2

Last week I decided to look into the virtue of compassion. The following is a continuation of a report that Dr. McGonigal from Stanford made on Joe and Terry’s show, The People’s Pharmacy, found on NPR. It was podcast 1104, first broadcast on November 24th. Dr. McDonigal brings science to what compassion is.

Compassion is a response to another’s suffering. It can go side-ways, however, the Doctor has found. A response to suffering can lead to anger or grief or sadness or overwhelming anxiety. This happens when we see that we cannot make a difference as individuals in the face of so much suffering or if we are suffering so much in our lives, compassion doesn’t enter our minds. Compassion that is not compassion is empathetic distress – a feeling for the sadness of others that leads to contagious stress. Compassion that is not true compassion stems from not being able to do something. A person can feel those responses a lot rather than free flowing compassion.

Compassion should lead us to feel better in our lives; boost our immune system, and relieve stress. Compassion can lead to us being heroic and brave; raise up maternal instincts in women and men.

So what can we do to actualize true compassion? Dr. McDonigal asks us to visualize the breathing in the suffering or anxiety of another; transposing it in our hearts so that we can breathe out compassion, strength, love, and hope. This affects us so much that it leads to a relief of stress in our own state of being. This is not a soft or fuzzy or mellow state of mind but leads to incredible courage and brave energy to do something for the other.

Again, she says, we can come across a situation where there is a lot of people suffering, whether it is a famine or hurricane or war. This can lead to us being overwhelmed. It can lead to empathetic distress. The enormous scale of suffering can lead to more stress within us. The doctor calls for what she calls compassion collapse. That is to pivot the compassion energy you feel to small actions, to a scale where you can serve. She says remember you are not the cause and neither are you the solution but don’t let that energy you feel go to waste.

There is a lot of anxiety over the Christmas season – especially if you don’t have enough funds to feed your family or buy your family presents. We can’t feed all the hungry families who are hurting this Christmas. No need for overwhelming us with worry just buy a bag of groceries or buy one present for a child or a parent. Your parish will do the rest. This should make you feel good; give you a warm glow, and reduce your anxiety over the Christmas season.

There is a biology of compassion. Practicing compassion can have a great impact on our immune system, the immediate effect can last from one to five hours. If we care for others, the body shifts to help us be able to care for ourselves. Being overwhelmed by empathetic distress of not being able to take action seems to occur in the amygdala of our brains. If we train ourselves to realize true compassion by doing something and not being overwhelmed by our own distress can help us find hope, peace, and happiness within ourselves.

For children, the best way of understanding compassion is not by being told about it or being taught about compassion. For children to understand compassion is by they being recipients of compassion. Far from them feeling isolated or lonely or disrespected, they should discover a compassionate space at home, in school, and especially among peers (that means freedom from bullying.)

Again, compassion is to relieve suffering – to relieve suffering in others and reduce anxiety in self. As motivation, it is to feel less suffering in self and not inflict more suffering in others. Don’t heap on suffering on those presently suffering.

Next week, Dr. McGonigal will let us in on a secret – how to feel compassion for those who themselves seem unworthy of compassion from us.