

Moving from Empathy to Compassion: Training Ourselves and Our Learners

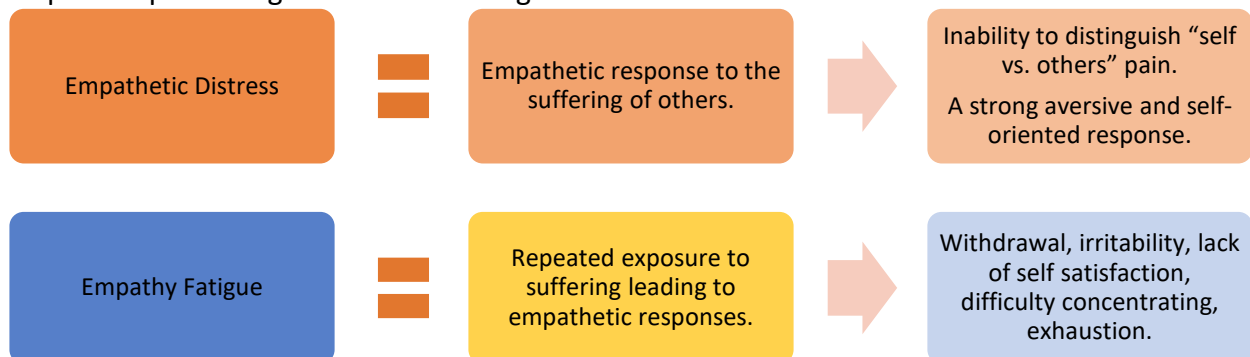
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Take Away Tidbits:

- Compassion allows one to recognize someone else's suffering and have the desire to help, while preserving one's own wellbeing.
- Empathy is the ability to understand and actually take-on or share the feelings of others.
- Raw empathy experienced repeatedly can lead to empathy fatigue which causes withdrawal, avoidance and other mental health concerns.
- We can actually learn to foster compassion for others as opposed to getting stuck in empathy through compassion training. The meditation links at the bottom of the page are a great place to start.

Compassion can be defined as sympathy or concern for the suffering of others whereas empathy is defined as the ability to understand and **share** the feelings of others. Studies have shown that when we experience empathy there is activation of the affective centres of our brain associated with pain. On the other hand, compassion allows us to feel the desire to help someone in their suffering, without experiencing the pain ourselves. In medicine, we often place a lot of value on empathy as something that physicians and trainees should possess. However, experiencing empathy with every patient encounter is not only dangerous to a physician's mental health, but may also be detrimental to patient care.

When we have a strong empathetic response to someone else's suffering, we experience empathetic distress. When this happens repeated times, we experience empathy fatigue. Empathy is often "selfish" by design. It blurs the line between "self" and "other". Repeated exposure to affective pain leads to withdrawal, avoidance and other mental health concerns. On the other hand, compassion allows us to recognize a person's suffering and have the desire to help while protecting our own wellbeing.



Compassion training often refers to meditation related techniques to foster feelings of compassion for self and others. It can help to separate your own physical and emotional suffering from those around you and fosters self-compassion through various techniques such as validating your own feelings and experiences and improving your positive self-talk.

A couple very useful links:

- <https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-practices/> - Self compassion while caregiving
- https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/compassion_meditation

References

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