

Researcher's Discovery on Experiencing Compassion for Others: Is it Psychologically Tiring as People Believe?

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Introduction

The researchers also discovered that people were more inclined to choose compassion when the event involved someone close to them, such as a family member, and that being sympathetic in this situation was easier. The researchers discovered in a series of tests that when people were given the choice, they often decided to avoid feeling compassion for others and claimed that doing so was mentally taxing, both of which were linked to their decisions.

The outcomes of the study were reported in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*.

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The findings show a need for new strategies to urge people to open themselves up to feeling compassion for others, according to Julian Scheffer, a Penn State graduate and postdoctoral research fellow at the University of California, Berkeley.

"Experiencing compassion typically leads to a desire to help others and improve their well-being," Scheffer said. "However, we discovered that some people are unwilling to experience compassion and find it psychologically tiring."

"Knowing when effort matters for compassion might help us think about weaker empathetic responses, whether in response to a stranger or mass suffering, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic," Scheffer continued. The experiments were among the first to look at how and when people choose to feel compassion, according to Daryl Cameron, assistant professor of psychology and research associate at Penn State's Rock Ethics Institute.

"These decisions correspond to perceived cognitive costs. So building compassion for your family may feel simpler than cultivating compassion for a stranger, which could be one reason why people's compassionate responses are so biased" Cameron remarked. One answer, according to Scheffer, could be preparing people to deal with compassion's mental demands, which might make them more likely to experience it. Otherwise, compassion may be more difficult to achieve than previously thought.

"People are frequently exhorted to develop empathy or compassion for others in the hopes that these feelings will lead to increased openness, cooperation, and a willingness to help those who are suffering," Scheffer explained.

"We wanted to see how people choose to engage with these emotional processes, whether they're engaged or avoided, and why that is," Scheffer

explained. The researchers conducted a series of tests with a total number of participants ranging from 62 to 215 in order to answer these issues.

They created three virtual card decks for participants to choose from that would instruct their response to other people – one asking them to feel compassion for the person on the card, one asking them to feel empathy, and one asking them to remain objective and simply describe the person which they then used in several experiments.

While compassion and empathy are comparable, some people define compassion as sentiments of caring or pity for another person, while empathy is defined as taking on another person's suffering and experiences as if they were your own, according to Scheffer. Participants were divided into two groups in the first two experiments. One was given the option of drawing from the compassion or objective decks, while the other was given the option of drawing from the empathy or objective decks.

Only about a quarter of the time in the first research, participants chose the compassion deck over the objective deck, and only about a quarter of the time in the second trial. Additionally, in each trial, they chose the empathy deck roughly 30% and 29% of the time, respectively. Participants were then given the option of drawing from either the compassion or empathy decks. People were more likely to choose empathy than compassion this time.

When participants were given the option of choosing between empathy, compassion, or objective decks, they were more inclined to choose objective.

"Compassion, according to some psychologists and philosophers, is easier than empathy," Cameron added.

"One approach to test that hypothesis is to compare them directly and give people a choice."

"When we asked people if they wanted to feel compassion for strangers, they usually didn't want to and found it more difficult than empathy," Cameron continued. Finally, participants were given the same decks as in previous trials, but instead of photographs of strangers, they were given cards with the names of persons they either knew well or were just vaguely familiar with [3,4].

"We discovered that people were more willing to feel compassion for their loved ones than for strangers and that this was linked to having less problems with compassion for loved ones," Scheffer said. Scheffer expects that the findings, which were just published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, will shed light on why some people struggle to feel compassion for others, despite it being a generally favorable emotion.

"More people are finding it more difficult to engage with one another," Scheffer said, "and because people are overwhelmed with the amount of misery they are experiencing right now as a result of the pandemic, compassion may be particularly challenging."

"Finding techniques to better manage the mental barriers of compassion may give a more satisfying route to producing prosocial motivation," Scheffer said [5]. Michael Inzlicht, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, was also involved in this research.

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