



KEEP GROWING

Jim Knight

WHEN TIMES ARE TOUGH, SHOW COMPASSION

At a time when people really need us to show compassion, some of us are finding it harder and harder to be compassionate.

The twin hardships of COVID-19 and political polarization are wearing down even the most resilient among us. Unfortunately, at a time when people really need us to show compassion, some of us are finding it harder and harder to be compassionate.

Compassion, as Sara Schairer (2019) has explained, is different from both sympathy and empathy. “Sympathy,” Schairer writes, “means you can understand what the person is feeling,” whereas empathy means “you feel what a person is feeling.” Finally, compassion means that you are “willing to relieve the suffering of another.” In short:

- Sympathy = understanding.
- Empathy = understanding + feeling.
- Compassion = understanding + feeling + action.

As I’ve reflected on Schairer’s definitions and my own attempts to be more compassionate during these challenging times, I’ve come up with two things I can do to try to be more compassionate.

Choose affirmation over moralistic judgment.

One thing that can interfere with the ability to be compassionate is moralistic judgment. As Margaret Wheatley (2009) has written, “It’s not our differences that divide us. It’s our judgments about each other that do” (p. 47).

When we moralistically judge others, we move beyond simply looking at reality and add negative thoughts or words about others’ character or competence. Moralistic judgment, at its core, means expressing contempt (“I can’t believe they talk, teach, parent, or simply act like that!”). Not surprisingly, it is difficult to feel contempt and be compassionate at the same time.



The opposite of moralistic judgment is affirmation, noticing the good in others as opposed to only noticing the bad. When we affirm others, we see their strengths and, at the same time, hold up a mirror for them so they can also see their strengths.

I can start to be less judgmental by considering what I truly believe: Do I want to separate myself from others (as being judgmental always does), or do I want to connect with others? If I believe in our common humanity, I want to connect with others and, therefore, need to try my best to affirm rather than moralistically judge others.

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Choose gratitude over resentment.

Feelings of resentment also make it hard to be compassionate. We resent others when we think they are getting more or are being treated better than we are. Feelings of resentment are especially common when resources are limited or times are uncertain, as is the case today.

I learned about overcoming resentment some time ago when my wife, Jenny, had a terrible case of food poisoning. After I rushed her to the hospital and watched the medical team give her intensive emergency treatment, I started to worry that the poison in her system was so toxic that it could be fatal.

In that moment, when I thought I might lose my life partner, all the petty resentments I'd ever felt toward her disappeared instantaneously. All I felt was gratitude for her and an overwhelming awareness that I didn't want to lose her.

For me, this awareness of gratitude is the way to reduce resentment. Gratitude helps me see the resentments that are superficial. Resentment, after all, is believing I didn't get what I deserved. Gratitude, on the other hand, is noticing the many great gifts I receive from the people I know. As such, gratitude is the antidote to resentment.

In conclusion, let me add three final points. First, seeing the good in others

Deep change takes deep work. Becoming more grateful and more affirmative is a lifetime journey. I know this from personal experience. I won't become a new person overnight, but I can take one small step toward being more affirmative and more grateful, one step closer to being the compassionate person my friends, colleagues, and loved ones need.

can reduce moralistic judgment, and being grateful can reduce resentment, but that doesn't mean we should ignore unjust actions or abuse. For example, we need to fight against (not affirm) systemic racism, sexism, and all forms of dehumanizing action by people and systems, and we need to confront (not excuse) those who dehumanize us.

Second, showing compassion for others is difficult if we don't feel compassion for ourselves. As Kristin Neff (2012) has explained, we are often harder on ourselves than we would ever

be on anyone else. To be compassionate toward others, we need to start with ourselves. That is, we should "treat ourselves," Neff writes, "with the same kindness, caring, and compassion we would show to a good friend" (p. 6).

Third, deep change takes deep work. Becoming more grateful and more affirmative is a lifetime journey. I know this from personal experience. I won't become a new person overnight, but I can take one small step toward being more affirmative and more grateful, one step closer to being the compassionate person my friends, colleagues, and loved ones need.

Taking that one step won't completely change me, but it might help me be more compassionate, and, on any given day, that might be all that someone needs.

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