

Acts of Compassion
Bringing Love and Caring Back into Your Life
By Michael and Linda Spangle

Chapter 1 How Compassion Begins

It was my first day of high school, and I was late.

Perhaps it was intentional, but I had started my walk to school 15 minutes later than I should have. I had been assigned to a large school that was brand new to me, and I wasn't looking forward to being there. I didn't know anyone, and I had no idea what to expect in my classes.

Once I arrived and found the correct room, I tried to slip in the door and get past the 30 students already in place. But the teacher, a big, scary-looking man with a bald head, saw me and he stopped talking. He pointed to one of the seats at the back of the full room and nodded, so I moved toward it and sat down.

After an hour of lecture, the teacher announced a short break and he headed toward my desk. I was almost shaking with fear when he stopped beside me.

But to my surprise, he didn't scold me for being late. Instead, in a calm, caring voice, he asked, "Is everything OK? Can I do anything to help?" We talked briefly and then he said, "In this class, I will be here for you. Always let me know if I can be of help in any way."

That brief gift of compassion touched my heart and totally changed my attitude. I developed a strong connection with that teacher and he remained my friend through my four years of high school.

The compassion chair

I sometimes wonder what made that teacher's actions so important in my life. I think it's because he showed compassion at a time when I needed it most. He had no idea how alone I felt that day. But it didn't matter. He sensed that I was anxious and he reached out in a way that calmed my spirit and helped me cope.

That experience has also influenced my efforts to show compassion to others. In my work as a university professor, I began watching for students who appeared unsettled and needed someone to help them feel safe.

For many years, I had an old, faded green, overstuffed chair in my office. The chair faced away from the office door and was partially blocked by a large fake tree. That setting helped the chair feel like a safe place for both students and staff members who came to talk.

Often the chair would be used several times during a day by people who needed to process life issues or receive a bit of help and encouragement. I also found that most of the time, the person sitting in the chair wasn't in a hurry to leave.

When someone came into the office and sat in the chair, I would simply ask, "What's going on today?" And they would talk.

I listened to stories about relationship problems, work and parenting challenges, and confessions of guilt or remorse. With each person, I attempted to show compassion as I listened to the things that were shared.

I rarely gave advice or offered solutions. Instead, I allowed my presence be the gift that each of them needed at the moment they sank into the faded chair. I suspect I helped change many lives during those green chair conversations.

Compassion reconnects

Do you have times when you feel disconnected from people in your life? It happens to everyone at times. I've heard many parents describe feeling disconnected from their kids, especially during the teen years. Even in a long-term relationship, you probably have times when you feel disconnected from your spouse or partner.

Of course, lots of things can contribute to feeling disconnected. Stress, fatigue, illness, even the weather can affect your connections with others. Feeling close again might require changing your attitude or your coping style.

But the one thing almost guaranteed to help you feel more connected is doing an act of compassion. This might be as simple as bringing home flowers or slipping your teenager some extra cash. Even the smallest demonstration of caring builds a bridge that helps you reconnect with people in your life. Try this and see what happens.

I see you

During times you struggle with feeling hurt or upset, you can start to feel invisible. Perhaps you feel alone in the world and you might think no one even notices your pain. What you want most is for someone to "see" you and notice that you are struggling.

With my high school teacher, things changed when he saw my discomfort. First, he empathized with my feeling alone and unsafe. Then he took action by asking how I was doing and offering kind words. With that simple act of compassion, I knew that he "saw" me.

Compassion begins with you noticing someone is hurting or feeling distress. This awareness of hurt or pain prompts you to feel empathy for that person, which then moves you toward doing something that addresses the discomfort.

When you display empathy and show compassion, people realize you've noticed them. Your actions demonstrate that they are not invisible and that instead, you actually "see" them.

Seven minutes of compassion

When researchers at the California Institute of Technology studied the benefits of acts of compassion, they found an interesting pattern. They discovered seven minutes of focused compassion had a powerful effect on almost all relationships. It deepened the closeness between people and helped them let go of anger and bitterness.

The study showed that after receiving seven minutes of compassion, people noticed an increase in positive emotions such as happiness and feeling peaceful. They also reported fewer symptoms of depression, anger and sadness. Many participants described an increased sense of well-being. In other words, compassion improved people's quality of life.

Seven minutes might seem like a long time, but with planning you will find it's not difficult to show compassion for that long. Here are a few things you can do in seven minutes:

- Write a long note or email. Include some stories about your life.
- Listen to someone without interrupting or commenting.
- Drive someone to a doctor's appointment and wait until it's finished.

One of our friends routinely goes to the home of a 98-year old woman and sets up her medication box for the day. Then she visits for a while, makes sure this woman has her meals in place and checks to see if she needs a ride to the store or to her doctor. Our friend says that sharing those seven minutes of compassion helps both of them have a better day.

You can certainly show compassion in small ways such as holding a door for someone or calling a friend. But setting a goal of seven minutes might give you an entirely new perspective.

Try the seven minutes idea and see what you notice. Create a list in a notebook or online journal of the times you showed compassion for at least seven minutes. Then evaluate the outcomes and notice how they affected your relationships.

This action can also give you a more positive outlook on your day and your life. It might make you feel more happy or peaceful, and motivate you to do it again for someone else.

Compassion changes lives

Showing compassion to others is not something new. Scientists believe that for as long as there have been human communities, compassion has been a part of life.

Psychologist Louis Cozolino says, “Humans have not thrived by survival of the fittest. Instead, they have prospered by survival of the nurtured.” He believes the most successful communities and families all share the common trait of caring for those among them who are suffering.

While teaching at the University of Southern California, motivational speaker and writer Dr. Leo Buscaglia was deeply moved and saddened by a student’s suicide. This led him to contemplate the ways humans become so disconnected, and he began promoting love and compassion in his classes as well as in his writing.

As the author of many books on love and caring, Buscaglia became known as “Dr. Love.” He preached about love with great passion, and at his workshops, he seemed unable to stop until he had hugged everyone in sight

He said, “Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

Always remember that one simple act of compassion has the power to affect and change lives, sometimes forever.

Chapter 2 How Compassion Works

In our small town in Iowa, we live next to a row of duplex condominiums. While walking our dogs past these homes, we've met several of our neighbors, including Amber, a single mom raising a teenage daughter.

A couple summers ago, we noticed Amber had trimmed some of her trees but left the branches and leaves in a random pile next to the curb. For branches to be picked up for recycling here, they have to be cut into four-foot lengths and grouped into bundles tied with string. But week after week, the ragged pile of branches sat on the lawn next to Amber's driveway.

Finally, my wife decided to do something nice for this neighbor. So she headed to Amber's home with tree trimmers, a rake, a broom and a ball of twine. For the next couple hours, she cut the branches into short lengths and tied them in bundles.

She also raked up the leaves and debris and put them into a special bag that city staff will pick up with the trash. Finally, she swept the leftover grime off Amber's driveway and sidewalk, then gathered her tools and quietly headed back home. The next day, city workers loaded the branches and the bag of leaves into their truck and took them away.

My wife felt good about doing an act of compassion for someone, and she did not expect a thank-you or other response. In fact, the house had looked quiet the day she worked on this project, and she assumed that Amber wasn't home.

Several days later, my wife and I took our dogs for a walk and noticed Amber pulling weeds in her front yard. We stopped to say hello and chatted briefly before getting ready to continue our walk. But Amber stopped us and said, "I know what you did, and I want to say thank you."

When we asked what she meant, Amber replied, "I was inside my home watching you the whole time you were cleaning up my branches. But I was crying so hard that I couldn't come out and say thank you. No one has ever done anything that nice for me, especially people I don't even know. And I appreciated it so much." With that, she jumped up and hugged us both.

Simple acts of compassion will often bring a rainbow into people's lives and can totally change their day as well as their outlook. And many times, you won't ever know what your actions meant to those who received your compassion.

How it starts

Compassion begins with an empathetic response to the distress or suffering of another person. In some cases, the needs are obvious. But often, you simply get a sense that someone needs a little help or kindness. Then you take steps to do mindful and intentional behaviors that show you care about the wellbeing of another person.

Compassion doesn't happen in isolation. Instead, acts of compassion occur as a response to someone's need or dilemma. Here are three steps or factors involved with an act of compassion:

1. Notice

The first step in showing compassion is noticing someone needs help. It might be an ill friend who needs transportation or a meal. Maybe an exhausted new mother needs help caring for a fussy baby. Perhaps your teen is struggling with math and is worried about failing the class.

In our busy lives, it's easy to look the other way and hope things work out for these people. On the other hand, you can notice someone's need and respond by reaching out and providing help or guidance.

This means paying attention to the child who looks forlorn or helping the neighbor whose trash container fell over.

Obviously, in your busy life, you can't do this all day long. But when distress signals pop up nearby, take a look. Pay attention and notice the situation.

Sometimes you'll respond to obvious distress, hardship or suffering. Other times, it's as simple as picking up a napkin or package dropped on the floor. In many cases, you can show compassion with words of encouragement, a gentle touch or even a surprise gift.

Noticing a need can happen in an instant as you hold a door open for someone or greet a fellow church member. But other times, as in the situation with our neighbor Amber, it might take weeks or months to realize there's a need.

Often we get preoccupied with our own troubles and forget to pay attention to how other people are doing. We may think, "I'm tired. I don't have the time. I don't want to get involved. I don't know what to say or do." And we do nothing.

Of course, sometimes there are good reasons to not stop and care for another. Perhaps the situation doesn't feel safe or people don't appear open to our actions. But if we become too cautious and constantly look the other way, we can miss a lot of miracles and the joy that comes from helping others.

Compassion's power begins with truly seeing people where they are, slowing down long enough to be emotionally present and letting others know you recognize their need.

2. Feel

Compassion requires empathy, which involves being emotionally moved by misfortune or need. Instead of just thinking about someone's problem, you bring empathy forward and actually feel something in response to the situation.

Suppose a few miles from where you live, a house catches fire. As you watch the images on the TV news, you think about how awful that must be for the family who lost their home. You might feel sad for them and what they are going through. Right now, you are feeling sympathy. But at that point, no one is benefitting from your sadness.

But later that evening, you research the address and realize the home was close to where your kids go to school. In fact, your child is in the same class as one of the family members. As you picture that child not having school clothes or books, you consider how you would feel if your own child lost all belongings.

Your sadness builds and you sense how painful it must be for this family. In fact, you might squirm a little as you imagine the horrors of this house fire and the family's great losses. Now you are feeling empathy.

Your heart gets involved and you begin to think about how you could help them in some way. Empathy requires putting yourself in their shoes and imagining what's going on with them.

Of course, this level of emotion takes energy. If you are worn out, overwhelmed, or highly stressed, you might shut down those feelings. But even if you don't do anything right away, feeling empathy for a situation helps you stay aware of the need for compassion.

Step 3. Take action

The natural step after feeling empathy is to take action or do something. You consider ways to help relieve the distress or suffering of others. You want people to know they are not alone and someone cares about their pain.

An act of compassion doesn't need to be a big, life changing gift. Sometimes it's simply to offer words of encouragement and support. Another time it might include a physical response where you do something that will help with the problem.

In the case of the house fire, you could donate a box of clothing and household items. Maybe you could bring the family some food or purchase a gift card for groceries. As you send or deliver your gifts, you complete the important third step—you do something.

Without that step, an act of compassion does not exist. While it's great that you notice or have feelings about someone's pain or suffering, taking action brings compassion to life.

Sympathy or empathy

Here's an important distinction. While having sympathy for someone might seem virtuous, it keeps you distant and sets you above another person's problem. On the other hand, empathy puts you on the same level and sends a critical message, "You are not alone."

Sympathy involves feeling *for* someone, but empathy becomes feeling *with* that person. With empathy, you don't judge or criticize. You simply try to understand what someone is feeling, and in that action step, empathy connects you to the person you care about.

One of my favorite authors, Dr. Brené Brown, says, "Rarely can a response make something better. What makes something better is connection."

When someone has a loss such as the death of a family member, sympathy says, "That's too bad." Empathy visits the family, sits with them (sometimes without speaking) and brings a gift or a card.

Acts of compassion don't involve trying to provide a solution or make the person feel better. Instead, you demonstrate that you are "with" that person by saying, "I will listen if you want to talk. Otherwise, I will just be here for you."

Compassion requires courage

Noticing distress or suffering doesn't happen automatically. You have to mentally slow down, pay attention and be willing to notice what's going on.

A true act of compassion doesn't require a reward or even a thank-you. Knowing someone appreciates your concern or your help might be nice. But if you are dependent on a response or a return action, you will usually be disappointed.

Acts of compassion don't have an agenda. Your goal with showing compassion is not to bring glory to yourself but to generously and openly share your gifts of concern and caring.

The reason for compassion

In our busy world, it's easy to ignore the needs of those around us. Yet compassion affects every aspect of our lives and when we do it well, it creates miracles.

As you regularly practice showing compassion, it will eventually become an attitude and a way of life. Over time, you will grasp why compassion is so important, and you will naturally identify yourself as a compassionate person. It will become part of who you are.

Build a habit of watching every day for opportunities to show compassion. Then follow the three steps: *notice, feel, do*.