

Compassion and Caring: Integral Features of Emotional Well-Being

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In several of my previous newsletters as well as in other writings I have emphasized the importance of providing children with opportunities to help others as a way of nurturing their compassion, self-esteem, and resilience. As an example, in last month's newsletter I advocated that an effective intervention to assist children to manage the anxieties elicited by the terrorist attacks was to involve them in activities in which they contributed to the well-being of others such as collecting money for victims, or preparing sandwiches for rescue workers, or sending cards of condolences. The act of enlisting the help of children conveys the message that we believe in you and that you have something to offer the world—integral components of self-worth and resilience.

Over the years I have received feedback from many individuals about the emotional rewards of helping others. Some have rightfully emphasized that the benefits of contributing to the lives of others is a powerful force at all ages, not just in childhood. Recently, a woman at one of my parenting workshops mentioned that she, her husband, and their two children wrote cards and sent a monetary gift to a fund for victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Part of the gift came from money their children had saved but now wished to donate. She said, "My two children who are 7 and 9 years old were so excited to do something worthwhile. It was a pleasure to see their response." She added, "But I must admit that I was surprised by the sense of relief I experienced in doing something useful. I had been feeling pretty depressed after the terrorist attacks but what we did as a family lessened some of my sadness."

She then told me that after her family sent money to the victims of September 11, she found herself becoming increasingly aware of opportunities to appreciate others, observing how "a simple note of thanks or a brief call to a colleague to acknowledge a job well-done had such a significant impact not only on my colleagues but also on me." She then raised a question I have heard from others, "Why do we tend to think of doing these things mainly when there is a tragedy like September 11 or during the holiday season? It's certainly important at those times but why do we take so many things for granted at other times?"

Living One's Values

This woman's comments and questions called attention to and reinforced something that seems obvious but is more of a challenge to achieve than we realize, namely, that we should practice acts of compassion and caring at all times and not only on special occasions. For instance, I have heard parents describe that immediately following the horror of September 11 they found themselves hugging their children more and being more available to them. Some have continued to do so but others noted that daily demands soon lessened opportunities for the family spending time together. It isn't that these parents loved their children any less but rather other priorities soon re-assumed greater prominence.

Most of us live very busy lives and it is easy for other priorities to interfere with a fuller expression of acts of caring towards friends and relatives or of time spent with one's spouse and children. Yet, we must continue to struggle to define our priorities and then to ask the important question, "Am I living my life in accordance with my values and priorities?" In my clinical practice I have witnessed countless examples of well-meaning people failing to live their values at a cost to themselves and to their families.

I recall one man who came to see me because of increased anxiety and irritability. As I often do in therapy, I asked him to list the things that he judged to be most important and of greatest value to him. He quickly mentioned his roles as a father and a husband. I requested that he describe his relationships with his children and wife. The picture that quickly emerged was a man who was so busy with his career that on many days he rarely saw his children and had very limited time with his wife. It was little wonder that he felt increasingly anxious and stressed. His actual behavior was far removed from his values and from the image he sought to achieve as a husband and father. In therapy we focused on ways that he could slowly change so that his behaviors would be more closely aligned with his values. He struggled to make these changes, but the more he "walked the walk" and the more caring he became, the less he experienced stress.

The Personal Benefits of Caring and Compassion

Years ago I read an article that referred to a “helper’s high.” It emphasized that the very act of assisting others triggered a feeling of exhilaration that had both physiological and psychological roots. Most individuals with whom I have spoken have experienced this “helper’s high.” I am not suggesting that we contribute to the lives of others simply to promote our own well-being but rather to recognize that an important by-product of our altruism is a heightening of our emotional security. Actually, if our main intent in assisting others was self-centered, we would be less likely to experience such a high.

My wife, who visited Tibet almost 10 years ago, called to my attention beliefs expressed by the Dalai Lama in his book “The Art of Living.” His words resonate with my own feelings, especially since they touch so directly upon the relationship between compassion and resilience. He writes:

“There are various positive side-effects of enhancing one’s compassion. One of them is that the greater the force of your compassion, the greater your resilience in confronting hardships and your ability to transform them into more positive conditions.... I also think that the greater the force of your altruistic attitude toward sentient beings, the more courageous you become. The greater your courage, the less you feel prone to discouragement and loss of hope. Therefore compassion is also a source of inner strength. With increased inner strength it is possible to develop firm determination and with determination there is a greater chance of success, no matter what obstacles there may be. On the other hand, if you feel hesitation, fear, and a lack of confidence, then often you will develop a pessimistic attitude. I consider that to be the real seed of failure.”

The words of the Dalai Lama are far reaching. A child or adult’s self-worth, dignity, hope, and resilience are nurtured when engaged in acts of caring. While being compassionate to others, we add value and meaning to our own life.

Sesame Workshop recently completed a study of the anxieties of children in middle childhood (6-11 years of age) since September 11. They also had data from a similar study they conducted last spring. In essence, they were able to compare children’s anxieties prior to and after the terrorist attacks. At the beginning of November I participated in a panel discussion

held in Washington, D.C. about the implications of their research. I want to highlight just one of the many revealing findings of their study. Sesame Workshop observed in their press release:

“Children want to help. The desire to help was expressed in a variety of ways. When asked what special powers they would like to have, children expressed an interest in flying as in the previous study, but now many want to fly to stop ‘the bad guys.’ Others collected money to help victims and participated in vigils. Children consistently expressed hope for the future, evidenced by mentions of communities rallying together, displays of charity and a new sense of patriotism.”

The healing power of “displays of charity” should never be underestimated.

The Actions We Can Take

The positive impact that acts of contributing and caring have on our and our children’s emotional health should prompt us to reflect upon what is it that we can do to keep this impact alive each and every day. We must not permit opportunities to pass by in which we can help others to feel special, cared about, and appreciated.

I frequently ask in my workshops, “What did someone say or do to you when you were a child or an adult that helped you to feel that this person really cared about you? What impact did it have? Do you attempt to do the same things for your children, spouse, other relatives, friends, or business associates?” Seemingly small gestures of kindness become lifelong indelible memories. One man recalled with fondness a manager who called him at home to find out how he was doing after his first week on the job. He said, “To call me on the weekend showed me he really cared about me. Now that I’m a manager I try to do the same with new employees and I always enjoy hearing the pleasant surprise in their voice when I do so.” Given the frenetic lives many of us lead, it is easy to neglect to make such calls but we must work diligently on having these expressions of caring become integral features of our behavior.

For those of us who are parents, we must model compassion as well as involve our children in helping others. Children are astute observers of how we lead our daily lives. I often ask youngsters what do your parents

do to help others. Although I hope that children do not respond that their parents are out every evening serving on different community committees since that would imply that they are not spending enough time with their kids, it is reassuring to hear children say, “My mother or father coaches a team in town or is on the school board or volunteers to work with the elderly.”

Relatedly, I ask children what charitable activities have they and their parents participated in together. I believe that even young children can accompany parents to deliver meals for the elderly or help out at a soup kitchen or go for a Walk for Hunger or Walk for AIDS or any designated charity. These acts should not be reserved for holidays but should become part of every family’s routine throughout the year. As I have often said, I believe there is an inborn need in children to want to help others and that we must nurture and reinforce this need.

There are many, many values that we can teach our children and one of the most important is to be compassionate, caring people. This task will be facilitated when we model compassion in all of our relationships and when we involve our children in experiencing the joy of being contributing members of their society. We must strive to replace self-centeredness and selfishness with a genuine interest in and concern for others. In such a scenario, all will benefit.

It is my hope that some of the thoughts expressed in this article will help you to reflect on your behaviors, values, and priorities. I want to wish you all a very happy, satisfying, and hopefully, relaxing holiday season.

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