

Compassionate Action Steps – Scenarios for Discussion

(Combined from works of Monica Worline, *Awakening Compassion at Work*, 2017 and Beth Lown, *The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare*, 2014)

Instructions: Working in pairs, take one scenario and discuss your answers to the questions on the following page.



Scenario One:

A co-worker has been late to work several times and is in danger of disciplinary action. You are aware that she is struggling with anxiety, but fears ridicule based on some staff comments about clients who struggle to come to appointments on time. She comes to you one morning upset by the harsh look she got from the office manager when she was 5 minutes late. She says, "Can you believe what a micromanager she is?!"



Scenario Two:

A staff person is showing signs of substance abuse. His work performance is slipping but prior to this he has been an excellent employee. As the head nurse, you are this person's manager and have a growing frustration with his lowered engagement with patients, families, and colleagues. He comes to you to tell you that yesterday he failed to check a patient's wristband and provided the wrong medication. He reports that the patient did not experience any adverse effects and he did everything after that to follow hospital policies when a medication error occurs. He says that he is coming to you just to be sure you knew and to verify that he did everything needed to follow-up.



Scenario Three:

You work at a pediatric oncology clinic and the parent of one of your clients has shared with you that she has lost her job along with her family's health insurance and will likely be withdrawing her child from care because she can no longer afford to pay for treatment. While the child's health has progressed, additional treatment would make long-term remission more likely. The mother is very upset.



Scenario Four:

You are a case manager at a community mental health center and are having lunch with a co-worker. She begins to express her frustrations about being assigned a new client, explaining how she already doesn't have enough time in her day to provide care for her current clients. She proceeds to divulge the difficulties she is having handling the stress of the work and her feelings of hopelessness in being able to help her clients.

Compassionate Action Steps – Scenarios for Discussion (continued)



Questions:

- 1. Notice** – Be present in the moment and able to recognize signs of distress.
 - a) What times or situations in your day are you most likely to have things get in the way of you being present?
 - b) Consider the scenario as happening in such a time. What can you do to be more present in these times?
- 2. Self-check** – Be aware of your biases (What am I connecting to from my past?) and thoughts about this person or situation. Appraisals are natural and dependent on your frame of reference from your experience, socialization and “training.” These are often inaccurate or incomplete.
 - a) What emotions arise for you in relation to this scenario?
 - b) What might your initial judgments be? What might your “old tapes” play back to you?
- 3. Seek to understand** – Suspend appraisals. Listen with curiosity to understand the concerns/distress from the other’s perspective. Listen for feelings and any insights or strengths that the person shares.
 - a) How might you invite the person to share information with you? What strategies do you use to encourage them to open up with you?
 - b) What are three possible insights or strengths you might hear if you listen long enough?
- 4. Cultivate empathy** – Develop genuine concern based on the feelings you resonate with your own experience of such feelings. This can lead to a growing desire and intention to help. There may be times when you do not resonate to the emotion of another, and yet you can continue to offer compassion.
 - a) What situations do you find most difficult for you to tap into your genuine empathy? What feelings might you be able to relate to even if you cannot relate to the situation?
- 5. Discern best action** – Work with the person to figure out what would be helpful to them rather than what you think would be helpful or was helpful to you in past, similar circumstances.
 - a) Compare your ideas for what you think the person “should” do with those of your partner. Note differences and the problems that might arise if your solutions were applied to your partner. Discuss how you might guide the person to their own solutions. Review [Moving from Establishing Empathy to Engaging the Person in Discerning Best Action](#) handout for additional ideas.
- 6. Take action** – Be aware that intention alone is not compassionate action.
 - a) What typically gets in your way of taking compassionate action?
 - b) What can you do to minimize those barriers?

Moving from Establishing Empathy to Engaging the Person in Discerning Best Action



1. Focus on the moment and what's manageable:

- a) "What seems like the next best step for you to do?"
- b) "What feels doable right now?"
- c) "How can I/we be helpful to you, right now?"

2. Listen for and reconnect them to their strengths to open their minds to solutions:

- a) "I heard your frustration and anger clearly. I also got a glimpse of your strength. You seem to have some ideas about what you'd like to do about this."
- b) "When you can't see your own strengths, who do you trust to help you to see them?"

3. Focus on the recent past, when the challenge was not a barrier for them:

- a) "I noticed recently that you were able to (feel or act in a certain way). What was different about that time?"
- b) "Sounds like this has come up for you in the past. Is there anything about how you dealt with it then that would be helpful to remember now?"
- c) "When you felt this in the past, what was one of your strengths that allowed you to deal with it?"

4. Change perspective and focus on desire to change:

- a) "What do you see as the benefits of dealing with this challenge?" "What might be the ramifications if you do not?"
- b) "If you could operate with a clear head and light heart right now, what do you imagine you would do?"

5. Recognize when the person feels stuck and assist them to think about what it would take to become unstuck: (If you want to offer suggestions, be sure to ask for permission first.)

- a) "You seem stuck right now. Do you need some time before you can think about next steps?"
- b) "Who is 'on your team' that you trust to offer suggestions?"
- c) "You seem a bit stuck when it comes to ideas for what to do next. Would you like me to offer some options to get your own ideas flowing?"
- d) "We both have seen others (other organizations) face similar challenges, would it be helpful to talk about what we remember worked for them?"

6. Change expectations > change attitude:

- a) "I/we need you to _____ because of _____; and I also realize that sometimes things get in the way of meeting expectations. When you're unable to _____, I need you to let me know as soon as possible so we can work to reduce the impact."