

Compassion in Action

Section 1



In this toolkit we will explore ways to maintain a compassionate presence in our interactions with students, families, and colleagues. The rationale for this work as described in the first section ([Compassion Resilience](#)) on the school toolkit home page, points to many positive outcomes for us and others. It turns out that coming from a mindset of compassion greatly contributes to our job and life satisfaction. Our first focus in the toolkit is to ask: What is compassion, what does it look like in action, and what does compassion requires of us?

Simply put, **Compassion** is concern for the well-being of others. It includes both the awareness of others' distress coupled with a desire to alleviate it. At the same time that we desire to alleviate another's distress, we also are confronted with the reality that we cannot "fix" another person's pain. Throughout this toolkit we will explore our professional role in alleviating student, colleague, and other's distress while maintaining our well-being, in other words, we will focus on growing our compassion resilience.



Compassionate Action Steps

(These steps are from the combined works of Monica Worline, *Awakening Compassion at Work*, 2017, and Beth Lown, *The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare*, 2014.)

While many of us practice compassion on a regular basis, it can be challenging to show compassion in complex situations. Having a common language can help us support each other to act with compassion with teammates and those we serve. You will notice that each of these steps requires a level of self-awareness. Any time two humans interact, each show up with their personal and cultural histories that can impact interactions. Authenticity is more important than perfection. Compassionate action takes practice and often occurs over multiple interactions. If you feel you miss a step, take time to reconnect with this person to provide the support you missed.

1. Notice – Be present in the moment and able to recognize signs of distress.

This may seem like an obvious and simple step. In our fast-paced, task-oriented lives it is probable that we walk by pain all the time without recognizing it. Noticing requires that our minds be present to our environment and the people with whom we share it. Being present is an intentional act. We can consciously decide when we bring intentional awareness to our surroundings and the people within. And, sometimes, the people raise up in such a way that we are brought into the present without an act of intention.

2. Self-check – Be aware of your initial thoughts and feelings.

Once you become aware of someone else's distress, the compassionate next step is to turn inward! We do this to assess how our biases, past training, role models, and experiences are coloring our emotions and judgements related to the other person's current experience of pain. Appraisals are natural and often incomplete or not accurate. This moment of turning inward allows us to set aside our initial ideas and emotions in order to gather helpful information. You may find you cannot set aside your initial appraisals or are not able to be fully present with the person. The more compassionate act may be to let the person know you are not able to offer the support you would like to give in this moment and suggest another time to connect.

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3. Seek understanding – Listen with curiosity to comprehend the other’s perspective.

Once you have suspended your initial appraisals, seek to understand what it might be like to experience the situation from the other person’s perspective. As you listen (rather than speak!), you will need to remain in a place of curiosity. Listen to understand what the other person is feeling and for the strength you hear even in their pain. What wisdom about the situation or ideas for what they can do are expressed? As you gain understanding of their perspective, you do not need to feel agreement with the situation or their behavior. Your goal is to gain some understanding of how they see and experience the distress.

4. Cultivate empathy – Genuine concern based on what you have come to understand.

While we can never fully understand another’s experience, empathy allows us a glimpse of their emotion within the experience. It is based on what resonates in you to what the other person is feeling. It is important to remember that even when we resonate emotionally, we cannot fully comprehend the other’s experience. Empathy 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.

The goal of being compassionate towards others’ suffering might lead us to believe that we need to first figure out if what someone is feeling deserves the label of suffering. This process could put us in a place of judgment rather than openness and curiosity. As we step out of judgment, we become more open to understanding another’s feelings and connecting to a place within ourselves when we may have experienced similar feelings. Connecting to a similar feeling does not necessarily mean connecting to a similar experience that led to the feeling.

Many have found [the following 3 minute video clip](#) from Brené Brown to be a helpful and fun explanation of empathy in real-life terms.



[Click to watch](#)

5. Discern best action – Co-plan with the person to figure out what would be helpful to them.

This step often requires us to go back to step number two – a self-check. Once we resonate with the other’s feeling, it may be second nature for us to jump to suggesting what worked for us in the past when we had a similar feeling or experience. The hard truth for those of us who want to fix the world, or at least the people in front of us, is that our solutions very rarely are helpful to the other person. The only way that they might be helpful is if the other person is trying to think through their options and they ask you for ideas that have helped you or you saw help others in the past. The best question for us to ask another person when we are discerning how to be helpful is, “How can I be helpful to you in this moment?” This once again, requires us to suspend our tendency to offer our wisdom. This is the time to reflect back the ideas and wisdom the person inadvertently shared as you listened. We can add another question, “What have you found helpful to you in the past when you have experienced something like this?”

6. Take action – Be aware that intention alone is not compassionate action.

Once you have done the work of steps 1-5, you act on what you and the person have decided is the compassionate action that you CAN take and that the PERSON BELIEVES will be helpful to them.

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The ability to be present and aware of ourselves, others and the environment allows us to take in and more fully experience our day-to-day lives. It gives us more complete data to make decisions and select responses that best represent our values and priorities. Awareness of self, others, and the environment or context of a situation are foundational to being able to act with compassion. At times, this purposeful awareness (mindfulness) will allow us to notice that we are the ones struggling. When we are having difficult emotions related to the people we serve, our team or organization, noticing our emotions with non-judgmental self-compassion can profoundly impact whether we experience compassion fatigue or are able to move towards positive connections. Many of the self-care practices included in each informational handout can assist in building our awareness.

SELF-CARE



Throughout the toolkit, we will practice strategies to support compassion resilience from the four sectors of the Wellness Compass.

[Self-Care Strategies MIND: Acceptance and an Invitation to Let Go of Resistance](#)



Section 2: What Are We Talking About? Wellness, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Resilience