

In an angry America, a new remedy emerges: compassion

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As the head of a big-city hospital's emergency department, Susan O'Mara has always focused on providing quick answers to people in crisis: A relative desperate for information. An injured person facing a very long wait. A colleague exhausted from dealing with fed-up patients. But until a special training a few months ago, O'Mara didn't consider whether there were ways to be more compassionate in her response.

The training taught the doctor to pause and listen, and not jump to fix or respond defensively if an angry patient is on the offense. She said it has helped her focus better and find a deeper well of sympathy, even as she deals with trying situations at MedStar Washington Hospital Center in the nation's capital.

"You want to get patients from Point A to Point B with compassion, and also not **internalize** and feel badly yourself," she said. "To approach someone who is sad, scared, angry — to approach someone who is angry with compassion is the Holy Grail of emergency medicine."

Defined as the ability to notice suffering (in ourselves and others) and then the desire to take action to **alleviate** it, "compassion" has become the buzzword for an angry nation. It is increasingly being held up by neuroscientists, corporations, business schools and psychologists as a concrete, powerful health strategy — and a successful business model.

Universities have opened centers devoted to compassion. Marianne Williamson and Cory Booker talked about it as an urgent American need during their presidential campaigns. Job networker LinkedIn and wealth manager Brighton Jones both recently created a director of compassion position.

Experts say this shift is the result of new research showing compassion's impact, as well as an urgent desire to address rising rates of depression and anxiety among young people.

The idea that it's good to be "compassionate" to yourself or someone else is obviously not new. But these uber-studied, emerging methods are very deliberate, part of a generation of neuroscience and genetic research into how the brain and body interact, and how relations with others have an impact on our health. The research looks at how compassion influences everything from the length of your life to how much you contribute to your employers' bottom line.

Techniques used to train people to practice compassion range from O'Mara's deep listening of others to hugging yourself, stroking your skin and talking to yourself in a calming way. Experts use teachings, including about the

interconnectedness of all people; exercises such as deep breathing or having a dialogue with a hurting body part, and practices like volunteering.

A group at the University of Helsinki studying compassion at work asks employers to run through a checklist about their employees: Am I showing interest? Understanding? Respect? Fairness? Offering the person a sense of control?

The focus on compassion comes more than a decade after the explosion in the U.S. of "**mindfulness**" — practices focused on attention, awareness and breathing. Health experts say compassion is the next phase.

Stanford University neurosurgery professor James Doty, whose 2016 best-selling memoir about compassion became the subject of a hit Korean pop song, said the compassion center he runs was the only one of its kind when it opened 12 years ago. Now, he said he has research collaborations worldwide. "Millions of dollars are being given to support this research," he said. "Compassion is no longer a 'soft' science."

No one is saying the country or the world is getting more compassionate. In fact, some widely cited research says young Americans are becoming less **empathetic**. But a compassion industry is rising in opposition.

The movement is fueled by a belief that "the level of suffering and the visibility of suffering has made compassion essential," said Jane Dutton, a professor at the University of Michigan who studies compassion in the workplace. Traditionally nurturing institutions like family and church are disintegrating at the same time social media is exploding, Dutton said, "compelling a certain level of urgency — and maybe some optimism, that this can be learned and facilitated."

At the same time, Silicon Valley is leading a quest for higher productivity, complete with research about **group psychology** and values and what makes people work well (the best-known example is Project Aristotle, part of Google's multimillion-dollar dive into what makes teams thrive).

Elina Lampinen, a bank executive in Helsinki, spent a year taking classes and doing exercises aimed at understanding and improving emotional skills around compassion. Lampinen, 55 years old, now works in risk management, and she said she feels much more compassionate and better able to have difficult conversations with employees.

"I've always had a positive understanding of people, but I'd say I'm more tolerant and understand why people do things the way they do — including myself," she said. "What I learned is that between stimulus and reaction, there is freedom of choice. And for me, that's a big change."

Nearly 100,000 people signed up for a 10-day online "compassion challenge" launched this month by popular Washington-area meditation and mindfulness author and teacher Tara Brach, who recently changed one of the

acronyms she uses in her teaching to include the compassion-related concept of nurturing.

"We're not survivors of the fittest, we're survivors of the nurtured," Brach said in an interview, citing a quote by psychologist Louis Cozolino.

The word "compassion" conjures different images. It can be a broad synonym for, essentially, being nice, being empathetic. And "self-compassion" can be **shorthand** for "taking care of yourself." The new movement seeks to narrow the word to more specific skills and actions.

Doty, Brach and others say the compassion movement is a recognition that mindfulness — however healthy — is limited, focused on being aware in a nonjudgmental way about your thoughts, feelings and narratives.

"You could be a Type A ruthless person, and mindfulness could make you more self-absorbed, for some people," Doty said. "In mindfulness, compassion is **implicit**. And in my view, it needed to be more explicit."

The movement also aims to define the difference between empathy — the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, in situations positive or negative — and compassion, which includes the motivation to do something to ease suffering.

Compassion debates have emerged. Is there such a thing as too much compassion? In workplaces, can compassion undercut other imperatives such as efficiency? Is compassion a feeling or a learned practice?

Joan Brown Campbell, a minister and interfaith activist who has been involved with pro-compassion campaigns for decades, said she worries about the term getting trendy and superficial.

"Compassion' is a very hard word. Some see being compassionate as easygoing, not challenging. For many, 'compassion' seems not risky enough. It's not something you wake up and say: 'I think I'll be compassionate,'" she said. "Compassion is a way of living in a diverse world."

For a year now, Scott Shute has been head of mindfulness and compassion at the 16,000-person LinkedIn. As part of its focus on compassion, the firm decided to shift its primary success metric of its job list from how many jobs are on LinkedIn to how many people get jobs on LinkedIn. "It's from a self-centered **metric** to an other-centered metric," Shute said.

He teaches a class called "From Me to We," which at times is about putting all company stakeholders — not just shareholders — in equal regard. Other times, it's something that sounds like corporate self-help.

"The 'me' part is having a growth mind-set. The 'we' is compassion," he said. "No matter what's happening you can do something. Going from pessimistic to optimistic."

A 2017 review of Harvard graduates who had been followed for 80 years

concluded connection and relationships were the best indicators of longevity. A similar **correlation** is made about volunteering, a University of Michigan study found. Other compassion-related research is more neurological or genetic.

Parneet Pal is chief science officer at Wisdom Labs, which consults workplaces on how to improve resiliency and decrease stress. New MRIs, she said, are being used to show which brain networks or hormone levels are affected when someone is being empathetic, which are affected when someone is being compassionate, and the importance of learning the difference when working with others' pain.

Doty studies how heart-rate variability is associated with being able to handle caring for those who are suffering without getting physically or psychologically overwhelmed yourself.

O'Mara, of Washington Hospital Center, decided to study compassion in her early 50s. With kids leaving the house and a new big job, she was looking closely at self-care. Aside from exercise and eating, she realized she needed a plan that would help patients and her staff thrive while keeping her from "drowning in other people's difficulties."

When she first heard of an intensive training through Georgetown University's School of Medicine, "I asked: 'Is there crying?' My friend said: 'There's 100 percent crying.' I thought: vulnerability is not my thing."

She aims now for some daily yoga or meditation, and feels the compassion training has changed her interactions with patients and colleagues.

"I had felt my mind and body were not connected, and I want to move into the second half of my life aware," she said. "I see that as the next frontier."
