



Compassion: The New Wonder Drug

Monday 03 May 2010

by: *Tom Jacobs* | *Miller-McCune*

New research suggests compassion helps buffer women against the physical consequences of emotional stress.

Maybe the Dalai Lama is on to something. Compassion helps buffer women against the physical consequences of emotional stress, research suggests.

Compassion for others is a pathway to health and happiness. While that basic tenet of Buddhism may seem paradoxical to self-involved Westerners, newly published research suggests it has an actual physiological basis.

A study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* found compassionate women are acutely receptive to emotional support offered by others, and this buffers the health-damaging effects of psychological stress.

A research team led by University of Maine psychologist Brandon Cosley conducted a study of 59 San Francisco residents, all white women in good health. Each filled out a survey in which they rated their level of agreement with a series of compassion-related statements, such as "it is important to take care of people."

One week or more later, the women participated in a laboratory session in which they were asked to perform a stressful task: Giving a five-minute long extemporaneous speech to two evaluators. Before, during and after, monitors measured three physical indicators of their bodies' stress response: their arterial blood pressure, cortisol level and high-frequency heart rate variability.

Half the women were assigned to the support condition: Evaluators nodded and smiled throughout their performance, and interrupted after 30 seconds to tell them they were doing well. The other half experienced the neutral condition, in which the evaluators provided no feedback except to re-state the instructions.

For those who were provided social support (i.e. the nods and smiles), "the higher their compassion (as measured on the earlier test), the lower their systolic and diastolic blood pressure, the lower their cortisol, and the higher their high-frequency heart rate variability during the speech task," the researchers report.

In contrast, for those who did not receive social support, there was no relationship between compassion and reduced levels of physical stress reactions. The stress-buffering effect seems to occur only when a person both feels and receives compassion — a virtuous loop the body responds to in positive ways.

One obvious limitation of the study is it only looked at women. "Females may respond to stressors differently than men," the researchers concede. In addition, they note that "giving support to others may be negatively associated with health over time if that support is not, or cannot, be reciprocated" — say, in the case of caring for an infirm relative.

"Nevertheless," they conclude, "our data lend credence to the Dalai Lama's belief that compassion for others may ultimately serve to benefit the self, particularly when compassion is reciprocated by others in stressful situations." It points to a potentially powerful prescription for stress-related maladies: Feel genuine concern for the well-being of two people and call me in the morning.

Founded in late 2007 by philanthropist Sara Miller-McCune, Miller-McCune is a nonprofit print and online magazine harnessing hard data and breaking research to support journalism that focuses on finding solutions to social problems. Supported by a combination of grants and advertising, Miller-McCune rejects any overriding ideology, believing that the best

answers can come from anywhere.

All republished content that appears on Truthout has been obtained by permission or license.

   **3** 
