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## The Day of Compassion

### First, a Few Definitions

All my life, I've been what most people would consider a sympathetic, empathic, and compassionate person—three attributes that are rarely differentiated from each other. In fact, I didn't realize there was much of a difference until recently, when I became the director of a nonprofit organization and began to research things like poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, and philanthropy.

*Sympathy* often involves an emotional distance from the troubled person. You watch the news and feel sympathy for the victims of natural disasters, the family of a murder victim, children who are starving, or animals who are abused. However, feeling sympathy can come dangerously close to feeling pity, which is usually unwanted by the victim because it can dehumanize or belittle the experience or feeling, even sometimes making you feel bigger or better than the victim.

*Empathy* is a deeper emotion in that it bonds you or brings you closer to the person emotionally. By putting yourself in other people's shoes and imagining what they are feeling, you can, if you allow yourself, vicariously feel their emotions. I believe that this skill can be fine-tuned and developed with courage and meditation.

*Compassion* is different than the other two in a very tactile sense; it's doing something about how you are feeling. My definition of compassion is the "act" of love, putting your needs behind the needs of other people and being willing to *be* the change you want to bring about.

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

—Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama

### Some Personal Background

Last year, my youngest sister went blind in her left eye. After days of being in the hospital and weeks of tests, she was finally given a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. The next few months were hard for everyone; she has three children who are used to her being independent and taking care of everything (their father is not around). We all had to digest the diagnosis.

To make matters worse, my sister is not the easiest person to get along with—she's boisterous, outspoken, and loud on a good day. On a bad day she can be rude, dismissive, and downright mean. She can make it hard to feel sympathetic, empathetic, or compassionate when she gets in her moods. In fact, sometimes I just want to strangle her or walk away.

As we went through months of getting used to this new part of our life, my sister seemed to get angrier and angrier. Members of my family have had to overcome many challenges over the years, and we've always managed to see the brighter side of life. It's what keeps us close and has been our rock though even the most difficult times.

But this time it was too hard. To see my sister in pain, out of her mind, unable to work or take care of her children or herself, taking steroids, was truly unbearable, and she became meaner than ever before. Her words cut like knives, and it didn't matter who she cut; she just didn't care. It became difficult to make decisions about what was best—not just for her, but for myself and our family.

To tell you a little about myself: As I've gotten older, I've become more of a loner. I moved from a bustling city to a three-acre piece of land in the country. I've stayed close to a handful of family member and friends, but for the most part, I keep to myself because I work from home and haven't gotten to know many people here. However, I've been making an effort to improve myself and to have a positive impact on the world. I became the director of a nonprofit called The Book Bank Foundation, and I've been spending a lot of time creating programs and events to help poor families around the country. Taking Social Psychology has led me to do a lot of thinking, not just about my life but about the lives of those around me, and I often share what I've learned each week in an effort to impart this information to others.

### **My Day of Compassion Decision**

When it comes to my sister, I've thought about our course readings and lectures on collectivism and the interdependent self and its relevance to my life. I have a large home, and I decided that I was going to invite my sister to move in with me. So on my Day of Compassion, I sat with my sister and we talked about how badly she's been struggling since losing her job a couple of months ago. We talked about how she's been feeling better but still needs help, and our fear of her relapsing. Being independent can make it hard to let others care for us; we can appear helpless, needy, or the object of pity. I told my sister how much we needed each other right now and how much the children would benefit from the both of us being there. We could share responsibilities and chores, and she could even have a space in the house that would be all to herself.



**My Sister (and New Roommate)**

She agreed to move in. Within the next couple of days we hired movers, and she and her kids are now officially here. My "day" of compassion looks like it has turned into weeks, months, and maybe years. I've set up my nephews in the guest room, and my sister and niece are together in my den, which is huge and has its own bathroom and outside entrance. I know it won't be easy, but we're family, and that takes priority over other concerns.

## **Analysis and Conclusions**

To answer some of the questions for the assignment: One psychological cost of behaving compassionately is that sometimes it can backfire. There's a saying that "no good deed goes unpunished"; sometimes the people whom you help will lash out at you. There's a chance my sister will do this, but no matter what, I feel that in this situation the benefits will outweigh the costs for all of us. My sister unexpectedly responded very well to my suggestion, I was open with her about how I felt, and I think this openness made her react in-kind.

In terms of social psychology, the most important tools in a case like this are honesty and compassion. By putting others ahead of ourselves and showing them that we truly care about their life and their well being, we can foster a more compassionate society.

Don't wait for others to make the first move, and don't think that compassion only involves helping those who are less fortunate. Every single person you come across every single day can use a kind word or gesture. You never know how that one word or gesture might change their whole day. Who knows, it might even change their whole life...