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Social Psychology
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The Day of Compassion

Compassion means to suffer with someone—to feel another living being's pains so much that one suffers along with that person. Etymologically, the word is derived from Latin and means "co-suffering." I truly believe what the Dalai Lama said in *The Art of Happiness*: "Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive."

Prologue to My Day of Compassion

In my home country of India, millions of people live below the poverty line as slum-dwellers in unimaginably dreadful conditions. Many of these people can't get two nutritious meals per day, proper healthcare, or schooling for their children. When it comes to compassion, there are clearly lots of opportunities for action. So, it took me quite a while to decide what exactly I would do to leave at least a few people smiling by the end of the day.

Because the Day of Compassion coincided with India's Independence Day on August 15th, I chose to weave the two events together. I was able to plan something wonderful, and I was really content at the end of the day. As prologue, let me share two background elements that formed the basis of the day:

- I live near an "old age home" that I visit from time to time. The facility is in the city of Kolkata and is home to 13 senior citizens who have no loved ones by their side. Some of these senior citizens have been deserted by their children, and others simply have no living relatives or friends who can look after them. Whenever I stop by, their faces light up. They share their life experiences with me, talk about their youthful days, and tell me stories about the India that existed before I was born. We have a great time together, and I try to visit them whenever I can. On the Day of Compassion, I wanted to do something special for these seniors.
- A couple weeks ago, I was talking with a friend of mine who works in the development sector. He mentioned that he was working on a project involving several slums and that he was meeting beautiful kids who could really shine in life if they had more support from the government or nongovernmental organizations. My own profession is in sports management, and I'm hoping to move into the "sport for development" sector soon. I want to use my skills and the power of sports to improve the lives of underprivileged kids in India.

Putting these two elements together, I decided that on the Day of Compassion, I would carry out activities connecting children in poverty with my friends who live in the old age home. To make the idea work, I just needed to do a little advanced planning and coordination.

The Approach, the Planning, and the Cost Involved

I asked my friend if he could gather ten of the kids he mentioned to participate in a full day of activities on August 15th. He replied in the affirmative. The plan was to start the day with everyone greeting one another and holding a brief football (soccer) match—after all, Kolkata is the home of Indian football, and nearly everyone loves the game. Next, we'd head to the old age home to hoist the national flag for Independence Day. In the afternoon, we'd have lunch together and watch a movie. Then, in the evening, we'd say our goodbyes before dropping the kids off at their home locations.

After securing parental consent, we ended up with three girls and seven boys between the ages of 8 and 13. I personally spoke to the families and explained our plan for the day. They were very happy to hear about it, and because they knew my friend well, they gladly accepted our proposal. My old-in-age-but-young-at-heart friends from the senior home were overjoyed, and they started counting days to the event. One of them said, "I can still play football. I'm not old—I have only ripened." We all burst out in laughter.



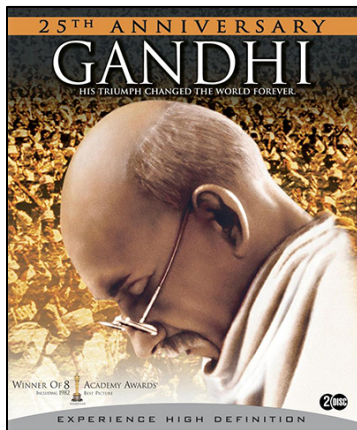
We got permission from the senior home authorities as well (they even said they'd give us a small minivan with a driver!). My friend enlisted college students to help as volunteers, I invited three more friends to join, and we decided to use two of our personal cars. I supplied the football, and for the movie, I decided to bring a DVD of *Gandhi*—a film about the life and work of Mohandas K. Gandhi, the father of our nation. I chose this Academy Award winning movie as a way to celebrate Independence Day, educate the kids about Mahatma Gandhi, and vividly show the power of nonviolent resistance, peace, and compassion. We'd play the movie using the DVD player and TV screen at the senior home.

The only thing left to plan was the food. My four friends and I decided to share the cost, and we secured a discount for "combo lunch meals" from a well-known restaurant. We also arranged for soft drinks and placed orders for sweets and light confectioner boxes as tiffin. All the vendors promised to deliver these items to the old age home.

From Independence Day to Interdependence Day

As planned, three of my friends picked up the kids in the morning, and two of us picked up the seniors from their home. At 7:30 am, we all met at a local football field. Everybody was looking happy, and when the game began, everyone seemed to be a kid. There were no differences whatsoever in terms of anyone's background, energy level, or even age—everybody took turns kicking the ball around. The "match" lasted for a half hour with a 10-minute break. There were unlimited substitutions, and best of all, it wasn't a match between the kids and the seniors—each team had a mixture of kids and seniors. The idea wasn't to have the players compete, but to bond. After a thoroughly entertaining session, we all piled into the vehicles and arrived at the senior home by around 9:00 am.

Next, we went to the rooftop of the senior home, where we hoisted the Indian flag while I played the national anthem on my mobile phone. Then we came downstairs and had a little tiffin. The kids were already running around the house, and a few sat on the laps of their new "grandmothers" and "grandfathers," who were busy telling stories to them. One boy took an interest in a chessboard that was there, and a senior who was an avid chess lover began teaching the boy how to play. We chatted some more, and one of the children suggested playing "charades." What followed was an hour of laughter and fun.



After finishing our lunch, we decided to watch the movie. None of the kids had seen it before, and although they knew who Mahatma Gandhi was, they didn't know much about him or his nonviolent movement against the British.

Once the movie was over, the kids had lots of questions (only three of the ten attended school—the rest had been completely illiterate until last year, when a nongovernmental organization decided to help educate them). Everyone began discussing the movie, what Mahatma Gandhi was like, and India's fight for independence. My friends and I did our best to answer questions and teach the kids about India's history, and the elders joined us. All of the seniors were born during the era of the British Raj, so they shared their firsthand knowledge of those dark days. One of them even spoke about how he had once met Mahatma Gandhi.

Around 8:00 pm, it was time to take the kids back home. As we said our goodbyes, some of the old ladies' eyes filled up with tears. One said to a boy, "I have a grandson who'd be your age. My son's family lives in America. I haven't seen my grandson in years." The kids promised they'd come to visit them, and in fact, six of the ten have already come back (the kids and I also plan to join the seniors during *Diwali*—the festival of lights—in October).

After a lot of hugs and kisses, we started to leave, but as I was walking out the door, one of my friends from the old age home surprised me with a handkerchief she had embroidered with my initials. Another senior told me, "She went to the market and bought the handkerchief two days ago. Then she embroidered it. She can't see very well these days, so she sat in the sunlight for hours and finished it, for you." I couldn't say anything at first. My eyes became moist. I thanked my friend for the gift and hugged her.

After dropping off the kids, I felt happy but I also had a heavy heart. I felt that what I did wasn't enough. *I need to do more. We need to do more.* There are so many underprivileged kids and so many elderly people in the world. Often, they want very little. They're just hungry—starved for love, for affection, for compassion. My parents congratulated and praised me for what I did, but I want to do more. I want to bring as much happiness as I can to the lives of people around me, and I pledge to plan something like this again in the near future.

Relating Compassion to Social Psychology

Why is it that there are so many people—and other living beings—in need, and so few people willing to lend a helping hand? How can we remain blind to the suffering of others? Why are we indifferent when someone sitting next to us seems depressed? Are we evolving into more mechanical and less compassionate creatures?

These are some of the questions I pondered while completing this assignment. In general, I consider myself to be a compassionate person, yet it took a "Day of Compassion me" to raise such questions to a "normal me." Yes, I visit people living in an old age home, but why haven't I ever spent a day like August 15th before?

In reflecting on these questions, many social psychology theories, principles, and research findings seem relevant. For example, the topic of compassion seems to be an area with a high degree of attitude-behaviour inconsistency—an area where the best of intentions are thwarted because we live life in a hurry or get distracted instead of doing what really matters. We also face the bystander effect, diffusion of responsibility, and conformity pressures that further reduce the chances we'll intervene.

But what happens when we ask people whether they're compassionate? The answer is almost always yes, perhaps due in part to cognitive dissonance. It's hard for us to acknowledge the suffering of others and say that we don't care, so we reduce our dissonance by believing either that we're compassionate or by denying that the suffering is severe. In truth, we could be far more compassionate.

Concluding Thoughts

The benefits from my Day of Compassion greatly outweigh any costs. During India's holiday weekend, I managed to bring some joy to a few people in need and, in the process, made some new friends! I know that I did very little, yet I believe Mahatma Gandhi was right when he said, "Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it."

I see myself changed for the better because of the Day of Compassion, and I'm determined to lead a more compassionate life from now on. Moreover, using my knowledge of social psychology, I hope to foster more compassion in others. I began this essay by quoting from *The Art of Happiness*, by the Dalai Lama, and I'd like to end with another quote from that book:

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