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Social Psychology  
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## Adding Color to the Day of Compassion

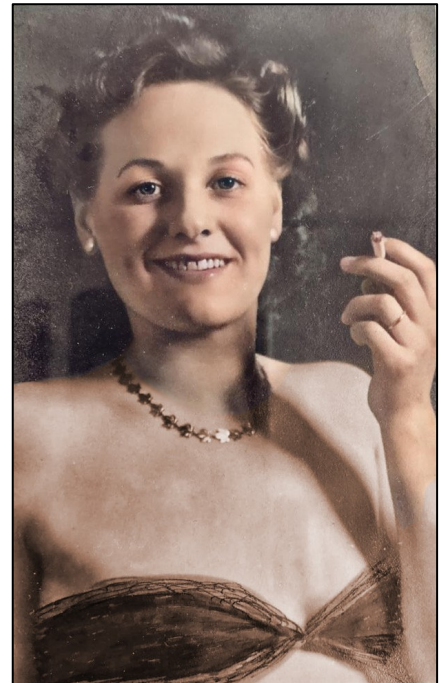
The course definition of "compassion" might be my favorite: The word compassion comes from Latin, and means, literally, "to suffer with."

The coronavirus presented some unique challenges for this assignment—that is, to act compassionately for 24 hours—but it also presented some opportunities. If we're in lockdown, how can we be proactively compassionate to others?

### What Did I Do?

Some of actions I took during the day:

- I went out of my way to understand how our hostile neighbor thinks, and why he behaves as he does (more on that below).
- I made an effort to speak to another neighbor's child, whom I'd heard crying earlier in the day.
- I reached out to an estranged relative.
- I sent flowers to an elderly family member.
- Using Facebook and text messaging, I checked on people whom I know to be lonely or living on their own.



My friend Tami's grandmother. She did modelling in her day, and there were no color photos of that.

My main project of the day, though, was to think about friends and others who had lost family members. These losses weren't necessarily COVID-related, or even recent, but I had noticed that people were remembering their loved ones more on social media lately, perhaps because they had time to think, or in a moment of reflection had called to mind long-lost loved ones.

Several of the photos they posted were black and white, which gave me an idea.

I decided to colorize a few photos posted by friends, and email the photos back to my friends as a gift. I've done work as a graphic designer, so it didn't take much time to give them a perspective that they may not have seen for decades, if ever—a lifelike, color version of someone they lost long ago.

Next, I extended an invitation over Facebook for people to send me black and white photos to colorize, and a number of people sent me photos. I then got busy rendering color photos of faces, houses, villages, tea parties, and family portraits—many soon after World War II, like this one:



The response to my work was overwhelming and often tearful (which was *not* my intent!). For example, after receiving the colorized image of her grandparents below, my friend Tami texted me to say that she had cried and was "over the moon" with joy. One person even commented that I'd briefly given him his mother back.



This much focus on compassion was more than I'd normally have, and I certainly prefer the "Day of Compassion me" to the "normal me"— or even the "yesterday me"! It has inspired me to do more—both in terms of this graphic project and more generally for others in need, putting myself in their shoes and "suffering with them."

### **Psychological Costs and Benefits**

The costs and benefits are quite easy to weigh up. The costs were largely to my pride (e.g., emailing a brother whom I've not heard from in years, being civil to a hostile neighbor) and a little time. In all cases, though, I felt like I'd done the right thing. Regardless of whether people ultimately responded positively or not, I'm secure in the knowledge that I did my bit to behave compassionately, which feels good.

### **How Did Others Respond?**

One of the Social Psychology lectures mentioned that violence tends to beget violence. Through this assignment, I've found that compassion also tends to beget compassion.



My friend and boss Joanne's earliest childhood memories of beach holidays with her mother and late father.

Still, this relationship is never 100%. A case in point is my problem neighbor, who has previously shouted at my wife, urinated over the fence, cut down a tree that bordered our gardens, and erected an English flag outside our garden when he found out my wife is American. During my Day of Compassion, I made an effort to talk with him about the flag, respectfully and compassionately, to understand one another.

Sadly, I was unsuccessful. Others heard my attempt, however, and without ostracizing the neighbor, found positive ways to express support for my wife. One such way was to hold a street party to celebrate American Independence Day here in England! To me, the party was also a celebration of their compassion for my wife.

### **Social Psychology Applied**

Over the course of my Day of Compassion, I noticed at least three social psychology phenomena at play: self-esteem, defensive pessimism, and altruism.

(1) [Self-esteem](#) is a person's overall self-evaluation or sense of self-worth.

As noted earlier, I checked on a few people to see how they were coping during lockdown. Two of them had confided in me, or demonstrated by their words or actions, that they were struggling with low self-esteem. This check-in was my attempt to show them that they matter to me, and to boost their self-esteem. It also lifted my own self-esteem to see that my gesture was appreciated.

(2) [Defensive pessimism](#) is a cognitive strategy in which people reduce anxiety and disappointment by maintaining low expectations for how they'll perform, even if they've done well in the past.

Before carrying out acts of compassion, I had prepared myself for the possibility that not all of my efforts would be successful. For instance, I considered the possibility that my email to an estranged relative might go unanswered due to his circumstances, which led me to word the email carefully and compassionately, with modest expectations concerning the end result.

(3) [Altruism](#) involves a motive to increase another's welfare without conscious regard for one's own self-interest.

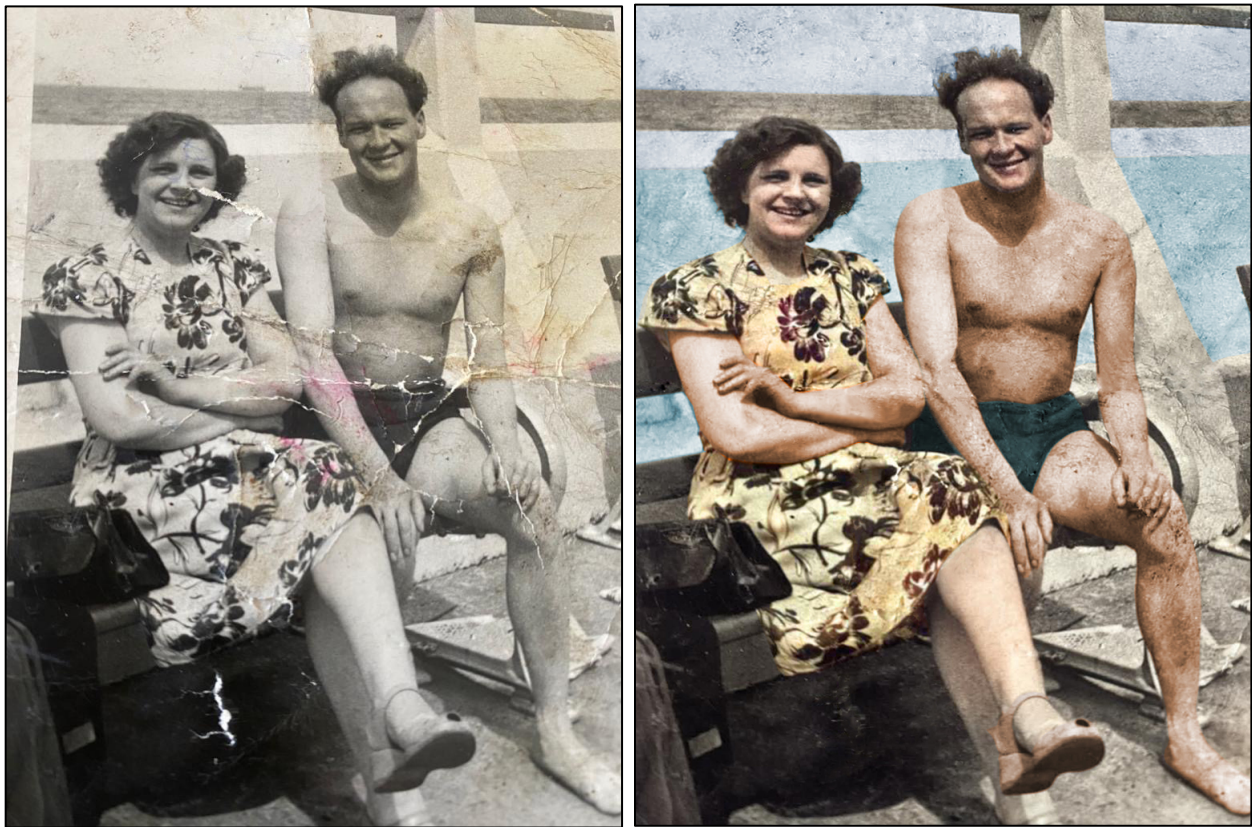
The act of altruism that stands out most to me isn't one that I carried out, but rather, an act that several neighbors took after my failed attempt to make peace with the person who lives next door. My neighbors organized a street party to make my wife feel valued and accepted, even if their kindness might cause them future problems with the belligerent neighbor.

## Final Reflections

Although it's hard to know how the future will go, I've learnt plenty from this assignment and feel motivated to continue behaving compassionately. If just one of my attempts at compassion has paid off, then why not another?

Most immediately, I'm going to continue the photography project and colorize more photos while there's a demand. People seem genuinely very appreciative, and I'm touched by their response.

I feel good about myself for trying, so there's a lesson there, too. With no major downside, it's healthy to be proactively kind and compassionate. Without this course, I may not have tried—so thank you!



Another photo of my friend Joanne's parents from her childhood.