



The Day of Compassion

Compassion is a word that has different meanings, and the meaning varies across cultures. I define compassion as "co-suffering." To feel true compassion is to be one with the other person and literally "live" her or his life. It is only when one lives the other person's life that one can truly understand misery and take steps to alleviate it.

I differentiate compassion from "empathy" and "sympathy" by using the word *compassion* to mean "one who suffers with others." It is very easy to toss a coin at a beggar or hand a slice of pizza to a street urchin, but the deepest feeling of compassion involves being a part of the one who is suffering, feeling the other's suffering so much that it hurts, and doing something to alleviate that suffering.

A Bit About My Background

I have been practicing as a doctor for the last thirty years in a rural area near Delhi, India. I had many chances to go abroad, but it was my father's dream that I set up a rural practice where there was no qualified doctor for miles and miles. Being the only daughter of a businessman, I had no dire financial needs, so I was able to set up a very ethical and compassionate practice. The core principles of my practice are:



The Waiting Room of My Clinic

1. Low cost treatment
2. Honest and unbiased opinions
3. Using generic drugs that are almost one fourth the cost of name brand drugs
4. Recommending minimal investigations to cut cost
5. Making sure patients complete their full course of tuberculosis treatment
6. Giving advice on how to prevent infection and disease, not just curing it

My Day of Compassion

There is a government school near my clinic that has more than 2,000 female students ranging from 4 to 17 years old and belonging to a relatively low socioeconomic status. Each year, I give a talk there about nutrition, adolescence, and other health-related topics.

For the Day of Compassion, I decided to use this opportunity to talk about something very different than I had before and to make a meaningful difference to as many girls as possible in a single day.

As you may have seen on TV or in newspapers, Delhi has recently been described as the "rape capital of India." Many high profile cases of rape have been reported, and even more cases go unreported.

Over a span of thirty years, I have come across abuse of very young girls by brothers, drunken fathers, uncles, and neighbors. So I thought that I would spend a Day of Compassion reaching out to the girls themselves. My objectives were to:

1. Make the girls (especially very young ones) aware of themselves and their surroundings
2. Warn the girls about unhealthy touching
3. Teach them to differentiate between a good and a bad touch
4. Help them avoid being intimidated by threats from older men and relatives
5. Give them the courage to report incidents immediately to their mothers, teachers, or me
6. Empower them with knowledge and free them from fear of being ostracized
7. Free them from feeling guilty about any untoward incident

In India, it is invariably the girls who are blamed (even if they are 4 or 5 years old) for enticing and provoking the males.

How Did I Go About It?

A few days before my school visit, I informed the principal of my intentions and asked if she could have it announced in every class that a doctor would be visiting the school to discuss the topic. This announcement gave the girls time to gather up enough courage to discuss any kind of sexual abuse they might be enduring at home or elsewhere.

Monday Morning

Dressed in my starched sensible cotton sari, I made my way to the school.

The principal had done a very smart thing. She had asked the girls to write anonymous notes addressed to me asking for help or advice in any matter concerning their bodies and physical health or anything that may be bothering them.



She had also instructed the teachers to divide the girls by age so that each group could be addressed in an age-appropriate way. Because I had only five hours of school time, we divided the girls into five groups of about 350 to 400 girls per batch. Each group was then crowded in a big hall where the girls had safety in numbers.

I started with the youngest group: Kindergarten through grade 4.

These girls sat close to each other, and I thought immediately of deindividuation. Here was a sea of faces blending into each other. For the moment, they forgot they were individuals with inhibitions and secrets. Nobody could point a finger at them. They were one body that giggled at my jokes.

I lightened the atmosphere with a few jokes about men.

Soon one girl stood up, laughed sheepishly, and said, "Boys are all bad."

"Why do you think so?"

"Oh, my brother is pulling my skirt all day."

"Maybe he is just playing," I prodded her.

"No, no doctor. He wants to look inside but doesn't want me to tell my mother."

This game went on for an hour. Surprising stories of neighbors, brothers, cousins, and even fathers were told to me in broken sentences. The girls were too young to comprehend the motives or the consequences of such abuse. I later decided to call their mothers to my clinic for counseling, and set aside a full day for this purpose.

The second group was comprised of girls in grades 5 through 7.

More horror stories were shared. Some girls were shy; some thought they would come out winners if their story was better in terms of abuse. These girls were still too young to understand the seriousness of the situation.

It was the two groups of older girls—those who had reached adolescence—who were the worst off. They were caught between loyalty to their families and the desire to report what had happened. Their remarks were restrained, and no cajoling could get anything out of them.

I told these girls that they could visit me any time in my clinic and speak with me in private. They would not have to pay anything, and all their information would be safe with me.

I left the school with all the anonymous notes written to me, and I was shocked at the revelations and sheer number of girls being subjected to physical abuse in their own families. I have now set aside a day every week to work only on this issue and try to help these girls.

The Costs of This Exercise

I did not incur any large cost in this exercise. On the contrary, it benefitted me immensely. By interacting with the girls, I felt that I learned about human behavior and was able to help prevent and reduce some of the most profound suffering that girls experience.

How Did Others Look at Me on This Day?

No one seemed to notice anything unusual about the school visit because they regarded it as part of my work. My clinic assistant did comment, "You will be missing a lot of your patients today." I just smiled and said, "I need to do this today."

How to Encourage Others to Be More Compassionate

I feel that compassion can be taught and that everyone can be sensitized to the suffering of others. Just as one is taught to be honest, loyal, and hardworking, so can one be taught to be compassionate towards others. What's important is to create a norm of compassion. If people are told repeatedly that others are doing a certain thing, I am sure most people will follow suit.

My Behavior a Month from Now

My behavior will definitely be different in the future due to this assignment. As I wrote earlier, I intend to help these girls on a weekly basis. Even if I can improve the lives of only a few hundred girls and save some from sexual assault, I'll feel that I have succeeded.

