

Brittney Hughes
Social Psychology
July, 2022



Thinking a New Thought About Others

To me, compassion involves taking into account the perspective of others and showing empathy, kindness, and a willingness to help those in need, whether or not their perspective is the same as our own. Even if we're unsure how someone came to suffer, we can choose to listen, empathize, and help them, regardless of our own personal opinions, understanding, or circumstances.

The importance of perspective taking was something that came to mind as I started my Day of Compassion. Due to COVID-19, my home city of Vancouver, Canada—like many others—was placed on lockdown. However, there were many homeless people who couldn't stay safe at home during lockdown. Their options were limited because many of the available shelters were full or had limited availability due to COVID-19.

As the pandemic continued, I started noticing people committing the fundamental attribution error when it came to homeless people, attributing their behavior to a lack of character rather than to situational factors. Many people made insensitive comments such as:

- "They could at least wear face masks if they are going to put everyone at risk being on the streets."
- "They chose to be drug addicts; that's not my problem."
- "If they wanted to be safe during a pandemic, they'd find somewhere to stay—they just don't care."

These comments were perplexing to me. How can so many people assume that all homeless people are either drug addicts or people who don't care enough about themselves or their safety to find homes? I didn't believe these assumptions were warranted, so I decided that on my Day of Compassion, I would find a way to help our homeless community, even if only in a small way.

As a fashion designer, I had a sewing machine at home and a box of scrap fabric, so I decided to sew masks for homeless people who might otherwise lack access to them (early in the pandemic, I had already sewn masks for my parents, grandparents, high-risk family members, and a few close friends). With a little practice, I was able to sew basic cloth masks at a rate of about 10 masks per hour, which meant that after approximately 20 hours of sewing spread across four days, I had created 200 reusable cloth face masks to distribute during my Day of Compassion.

When the day arrived, a generous friend then drove me around the city and helped me drop off the masks. By the end of the day, we had hand-delivered 200 masks to homeless people in downtown Vancouver!

Social Reactions

The mask recipients had a variety of reactions to these deliveries. Most people expressed gratitude, thanking us for thinking of them during this time. Some were less than grateful, as they "would have preferred money"; however, we knew that giving out money would have led to mixed results. Many of the homeless people we encountered had fallen on hard times, lost their homes, or were diagnosed with ailments and disorders that made finding work difficult. Some were addicts or backpackers who had run out of money. In short, the people we met varied widely and were from all walks of life. Seeing this diversity was a very eye-opening experience and confirmed my original hypothesis that homeless people were not simply drug addicts or self-destructive people.



Here are a few of the masks I sewed early in the pandemic, before masks became widely available.

After completing my Day of Compassion, I spoke with friends and family members about the experience, and the response was overwhelming. Many people wanted to find ways to contribute as well, such as offering to help me make and deliver more masks again the next week. I even had a friend who works in one of our mental health and addiction centers reach out to me, because one of the people I had given a mask to happened to be one of her clients, and she wanted to know if her center could order some masks from me for other clients.

Even though this wasn't an explicit goal, I later learned that my project had inspired a couple friends to sew masks for people in their own community. In my opinion, this ripple effect was one of the best results that came from my Day of Compassion.

Concluding Reflections

My Day of Compassion and the subsequent results of this day have strengthened my belief that the benefits of compassionate acts far outweigh any cost associated with being compassionate. Some of the benefits I discovered are as follows:

1. Compassion can be learned and can motivate others to act, as shown by the effect my Day of Compassion had on friends and family members who, after witnessing my day, wanted to get involved and help the community.

2. Compassion can be beneficial to our happiness and health. This was shown in a study by Barbra Fredrickson and her colleagues (2008).* The results of this study showed that positive emotions such as compassion, when implemented in our daily practices, contribute to important downstream life outcomes. Essentially, what I understood from this study is that positive input (compassion, meditation, mindfulness, etc.) results in positive output (compassionate acts, positive relationship development, better physical health.). This dynamic took place during my Day of Compassion, because my acts of compassion not only helped others, but helped me as well. By the end of the day, I felt a sense of joy, relief, and positive motivation that has continued since that day.

I believe that in order to encourage compassion and create a more compassionate society, it's important to break down social barriers that we've erected around ourselves. In other words, we need to see each other as "we" rather than "us vs. them," because an us-them mentality often generates false notions that lower the perceived value and humanity of outgroup members. This ingroup bias—which even some of my closest friends exhibit—seems to be the main thing preventing my community from helping homeless people.

In conclusion, a more compassionate society begins with reducing social barriers and putting everyone on the same team, because, in the final analysis, we are all humans living on the same planet. Beliefs that embrace a hierarchical view of how people should be treated tend to close the gates to compassion. The good news, though, is that a belief is simply a thought that we keep thinking. The first step toward increasing compassion, in my view, is just this: Try thinking a new thought about others.

* Fredrickson, B. L., Cohn, M. A., Coffey, K. A., Pek, J., & Finkel, S. M. (2008). Open hearts build lives: Positive emotions, induced through loving-kindness meditation, build consequential personal resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95, 1045-1062.