

Chapter 18

Empathy and Compassion

Have you ever gone out of your way to help another person? We are sure that every one of you has, at some time in your life. When was the last time you stopped to help someone? Maybe your parents gave a ride to someone stuck on the highway with a broken-down car, or you took time to help a friend with his homework. Perhaps you babysat for your mom or dad for a few minutes so they could run to the store, or you sat and listened to your neighbor tell you the same story for the hundredth time because you knew he didn't have anyone to talk to.

When you see an old lady struggling with her heavy bags on the street you may imagine *how would I feel, and how would I help if that were my grandmother?* Or if you see another student in school crying, you may stop and think *how would I want people to treat me if I were upset and crying in school?* When you see yourself, your family and your friends in the faces of other people, you grow to be an empathetic person. When you lend a hand to someone in need, you are acting as a compassionate person.

This does not mean that you love a total stranger as you love your own family. Of course you love your family more; that is healthy and natural. Having compassion means that you care about other people and see other people as valuable and worthy of your time, concern and interest.

What is Empathy?

Empathy is being able to put yourself in someone else's place. American Indians have an expression: *Do not judge another person until you walk a mile in his moccasins.* Since we cannot actually walk a mile in someone else's shoes, how can we try to understand how other people feel?



An Empathetic Person Thinks:

- ☹ *I wonder how he feels?*
- ☹ *I wonder what it is like to be in his shoes?*
- ☹ *How would I feel if I had no money and couldn't find a decent job?*
- ☹ *How would I feel if I lost my favorite CD at school?*

An Empathetic Person Says:

- ☹ *Are you all right?*
- ☹ *How do you feel?*
- ☹ *What do you think?*

Looking with Understanding

If you understand that all people have feelings and that all people want to be treated with kindness and respect, then you can begin to care for others. Can you guess how someone feels by the way they behave? What does someone's face tell you? What does the tone of a person's voice tell you? What does the way a person sits or stands tell you? Do you notice when your friends are happy or sad? How can you tell?



Listening with Understanding

Being compassionate towards others may be shown in many ways—sometimes by giving a person something, or a knowing look, a certain smile, a warm embrace, or perhaps a friendly ear.

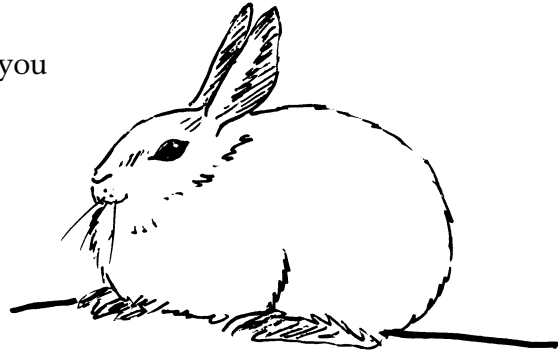
When people are sad and lonely or upset about something, they often only need someone to listen to them and they will feel better. How do you listen to someone?

It sounds funny, doesn't it? Actually, listening is a skill that most people are never taught. Think of all of the hours you spent learning to read and write. Did you ever take a class in listening?

Can you think of all of the people you love and are close to? Which ones are the best listeners? How do they show you that

they care about you and about what you say? Here are some helpful hints for being a good listener:

- Ⓢ *Listen to everything the person says without stopping him or interrupting him.*
- Ⓢ *Try not to think of other things when someone is telling you something.*
- Ⓢ *Do not try to fix her situation by telling her what to do. If she honestly wants your opinion, you can give her feedback.*
- Ⓢ *Do not tell him about something similar that happened to you, just let him talk.*



What is Compassion?

Compassion is caring for others in their need. Compassion may be shown in many ways. A compassionate person is one who cares about what others feel as well as how others live. A truly compassionate person could not pass another suffering person in the street without at least taking notice of him. Compassion compels people to act in kindness, to love those whom they may not even like, to understand how someone else may feel, even when that is difficult.

Compassion in Action

Compassion begins as a feeling you have inside your heart. You see someone and begin to understand how they feel because you can imagine how you would feel if you were that person. But after you know how that person feels, you show compassion through your actions. Compassionate acts may be:

- Ⓢ *Doing something kind for someone else even when it inconveniences you.*
- Ⓢ *Comforting someone who is sad or lonely.*
- Ⓢ *Understanding how someone else feels and communicating your understanding.*

A compassionate person seeks to give to others, to care for others and to help others who are in need.

Your Heart

What do you think someone means when they say, *He has a big heart*? Do they mean that if you opened up his chest you would find that his heart was enlarged, bigger than the average person's? What are some of the other things people say? *He is cold-hearted, she is hard-hearted, he is warm-hearted, she is soft-hearted...* What do all these things mean? Would you say that your heart is one of the most important parts of you? Imagine that you knew a person who was perfect in every way but was known to be *heartless*. It wouldn't matter how smart, talented, strong, or beautiful that person was, you wouldn't want a "heartless" friend, parent, teacher or even marriage partner (in the future, of course).

What does someone with a big heart act like? This person helps other people. He shares his time, money and talents to benefit others. He cares how other people feel, and what they need. He has time to stop and take notice of others because he is not overly focused on himself. Caring, empathy and compassion flow from your heart. What is your heart like? How would you describe yourself?

Compassion for All Living Things



Compassion can be shown to all living things—not only people. Have you ever stopped to help an injured animal? Have you ever felt sorry for a half-dead insect and either put it out of the way of people's feet or put it to its death as quickly as you could so it would suffer no more? Have you ever fed birds or wild animals in winter? To love and care for animals and the environment is another way to show compassion.

People who love nature often rid parks and forests of any unnatural wastes—beer cans, paper cups, newspaper, tins, candy wrappers. These things take away from the natural beauty of the earth. Do you think that the trees, the flowers, the clean clear brook, and all of the living creatures in their natural home would prefer to live with or without garbage?

Making a Difference

There are a million ways to show compassion. A compassionate person may lend a hand when he sees someone in need of help. A compassionate person may give money every month to a charity she wants to support. There are thousands of charities. Other people like to give their time by volunteering. Many volunteer opportunities exist. You can help out on a rescue squad, work to help pass legislation to protect wildlife, or lend a hand at your local animal shelter, just to name a few.

If none of these things appeal to you, that's okay. Everyone has different interests, skills and talents. It's best to find something that you enjoy doing for others. Then everyone benefits. No matter how you decide to share your time and energy with others, your help will not go unnoticed. One of the greatest benefits of helping others is that it often makes you feel a lot better about yourself. Remember that no matter what you do, you are making a difference when you act out of compassion. If you feel overwhelmed by the neediness around you, remember you can help by doing one thing at a time. You do not have to do everything. One person can make a difference. Here is a story one young man told us.

Last year we went on winter vacation to Chicago to see my Uncle Tom. It was so cold I could barely stand it. My Uncle Tom and I were walking to the store when something strange happened to me. Right outside of the store was this old man. He was shaky from the cold. I tried to walk by him without looking at him, but he reached out and touched me on the sleeve. When I looked at his face he said, "I'm really hungry, can you help me?" I just smiled.

When Uncle Tom and I got in the store I found just what I wanted, and I was walking up to the register to buy it when I looked outside and saw that man standing there all hunched over. I told Uncle Tom maybe that man was really hungry. Uncle Tom suggested that we invite the man to get a hamburger with us. We were planning on eating out anyway. When we asked him his whole face got bright and he said, "Sure." We went to this place across the street that has great hamburgers. The man ate two hamburgers, two large french fries and a huge coke. He even asked if he could buy one more to save for dinner. He really was incredibly hungry because those burgers were giant. He didn't say much to us, but when he finished he looked at Uncle Tom and me and smiled. Then he said thanks and left. I felt like in some small way I made a difference for that one guy.

Rich, 17



Journal

Have you ever seen an old person begging? If so, how did it make you feel? Can you imagine how you would feel if this person were someone you knew and cared about?



To Do

1. Now it's your turn to listen. How well do you listen to your friends, family and classmates? Read through the list in the section *Listening with Understanding* and check yourself against the points listed. Give yourself a rating on the scale below.

On a scale from 1 to 10 what kind of listener are you?

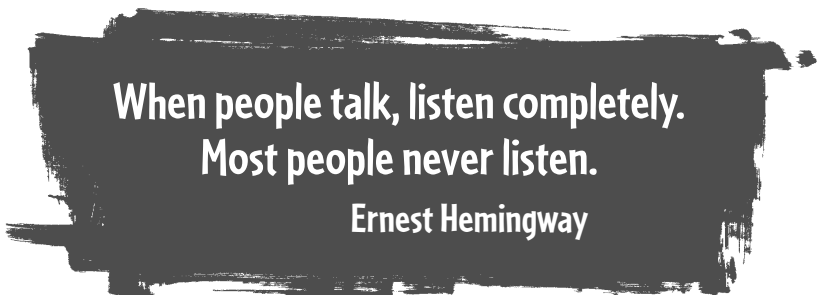
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
terrible	bad	average	above average	good	great	perfect!			

2. In groups, make a list of some of the compassionate acts you have seen others do, or heard about secondhand. Of all of the compassionate acts you and your group members have seen and heard about, which one seems the most compassionate to you? Why?
3. In groups, make a list of all of the things that you could do in your school and around your home that would help others. If you feel encouraged, make a plan with a friend to do something. Start with something small and if you do well, add to your compassionate acts. Afterward, with your friends, and the others participating in your class, discuss what you have done and what your experience was like.



Key Ideas

- @ Part of being compassionate is being empathetic—able to listen to another person without interruption or judgment.
- @ Compassion is helping others because we understand how they feel.



**When people talk, listen completely.
Most people never listen.**

Ernest Hemingway

