

WHY COMPASSION MATTERS – With Love from Dr. G

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Greetings Country Family,

My intention was to post this on Valentine's Day yesterday, but I decided to wait and let us all have a day to process the terrible news about the Florida school shooting. I thought Valentine's Day might be a perfect time to talk about love and compassion, but the truth is, ANY time is the perfect time to talk about this. Love cannot occur without compassion. And healthy relationships cannot occur without love. So...What is COMPASSION? Here are a few definitions:

- ❖ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, present day) "Sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it."
- ❖ (Collins Dictionary, present day) "A feeling of pity, sympathy, and understanding for someone who is suffering."
- ❖ (Webster Dictionary, 1828) "A suffering with another; painful sympathy; a sensation of sorrow excited by the distress or misfortunes of another; pity; commiseration. *Compassion* is a mixed passion, compounded of love and sorrow; at least some portion of love generally attends the pain or regret, or is excited by it. Extreme distress of an enemy even changes enmity into at least temporary affection."

Compassion, and an understanding of what it is, has been around for a very long time, certainly predating 1828. Compassion is not simply a word (although it is a powerful one!) or an occasional act. If you really think about it, this concept of compassion lives at the HEART and core of our humanity. Living a life with compassion is about having a thought-process that is a habit, just like any other core set of values you may believe in or embody. This is not unlike other concepts, for example, GRATITUDE, or KINDNESS, or GENEROSITY. Compassion helps us heal in our relationships with other people, and it helps us stay connected (FEEL connected) and bonded with the people around us. We know this is true! Think about what happens to your relationships when you feel a lack of compassion from others. You begin to question whether they care, love you, or understand you, and slowly (or quickly) the relationship crumbles.

If you currently don't care about your relationships with others (because you are avoiding and isolating), here is something else to think about. Compassion and our ability to stay connected with other people actually impacts our health – mental and physical! People who have people are healthier and live longer, and decades of research on happiness have consistently taught us this. Let me emphasize this again – **people who have close relationships with people (even just a few people) are**

significantly happier and therefore healthier than those who lack interpersonal relationships. And unfortunately, when people begin to feel disconnected from others (often related to depression, etc.), they also lose this experience of compassion in both directions. When this happens, we might see both harm to self and to others (e.g., think about the backgrounds and profiles of perpetrators of violent acts).

There is interesting new research examining the impact of technology on our ability to feel compassion. Findings warn us about the negative impact on the younger generations who are growing up behind computer and electronic screens, communicating through cyberspace and anonymous profiles. The problem with this “type” of socializing is that it is NOT true socializing, and it lacks a level of accountability that we have when we are face-to-face. Think about it...most of you would feel much more comfortable telling someone to “Fuck off” by tweet, messaging, text, on the telephone, or anonymously online behind the mask or protection of a 2-dimensional profile/space. (Yes, I know plenty people would be just as comfortable doing this in person, and that is an entirely different issue, more likely related to anger management problems – if this sounds like you, please read my UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS & DECODING ANGER article!). The simple fact is that people would be far less likely to confront another person as aggressively face-to-face, if for no other reason, out of fear of ramifications (e.g., arrest, physical harm, distress to children or family members present, pressure to conform to appropriate behavior in public). The lack of accountability leaves especially our youth (whose brains are not completely developed until early to mid-20s) at the mercy of occasional life lessons from overwhelmed parents (who are often now both working just to feed them!), overworked and underpaid teachers, and generally overscheduled grown-ups, who may or may not have time to model healthy behaviors. Online, there are no or few boundaries (although the legal system is starting to work on implementing some).

Why does this matter? Because compassion develops in the context of sitting face-to-face with another human being. And this is not actually even a “human” phenomenon...other animal species demonstrate compassion as well. We cannot learn compassion through a computer screen. Remember that 70-90% of what we communicate is NON-verbal. We pick up on how another person is feeling by looking at their face and body language, and by feeling their energy (or pain), and non-verbal mannerisms. These simply cannot be relayed as effectively through electronics. We may try to communicate some level of emotional content by using emoticons, but that still does not tell the entire story. In effect, socializing through electronic means allows for the ultimate form of avoidance.

Another fatal consequence of avoidance is that people (especially our youth who are growing up in this world of technology) are left with fewer and fewer opportunities to build confidence in social settings. If you’ve read my previous posts on anxiety (i.e., ANXIETY AND PANIC, WHY AVOIDANCE MAKES IT WORSE), then you also now understand the relationship between avoidance and the development and maintenance

of anxiety. I imagine that today's youth will grow up to have higher percentages of social anxiety and other anxiety disorders simply because of the culture in which they are being raised, and experiencing a significantly lower amount of in-person socializing! Even school/education has gone online and behind the computer screen!!! Yikes.

Living with compassion is a way of thinking, a way of loving, and a lifestyle. And here's the thing about compassion. Compassion for the self and compassion for others are one in the same. They are two sides of the same coin. They CANNOT be separated, and thus if you lack compassion for yourself, you will lack compassion for others, and vice versa. It's something worth working on for your health and happiness and that of the people around you. It's probably not too far-fetched to say that compassion may even be something that is protective for society. So, how do you foster compassion? Well, hopefully you've been reading my posts...ALL OF THEM!!!...compassion develops in a context of healthy socializing, learning how to communicate in healthy and effective ways, and learning how to challenge unhelpful/unhealthy thoughts (which impacts the ways we feel and behave). Essentially, the healthier you are, the more power you have to influence people around you (i.e., LEADING BY EXAMPLE). And also remember the compassion statement in times that you are suffering, because it's a great starting place, which will inevitably lead to having more compassion for others.

“I am having a moment of suffering. Suffering is a part of life. May I be kind to myself.”

- With Love and Compassion for all of us (Route 91ers) and all of the victims of other mass violence events, Dr. G