Compassion and its implications for Social Work Education and Practice

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Overview of Webinar

* Introduction
* Definitions of Compassion
* Contribution of various academic disciplines to the study of Compassion – positive psychology, evolutionary studies, organisational studies, social psychology.
* Transfer of research findings into clinical training
* Conclusion
Commonly held stereotypes of social workers are characterized by practitioners acting compassionately to others. (and each other)

However the practice of compassion receives little mention in social work literature or competency framework documents.

This is interesting considering that at the heart of the profession is the quality relationship or connection the practitioner has with their client.

This webinar will explore what research findings on Compassion can offer both the profession and practice of Social Work.
Introduction

- One of the most salient factors for a student’s decision to embark on a professional course of tertiary study in health is to help others.
- Radley & Figley (2007) highlight that social workers are primarily guided by compassion for humanity and an altruistic desire to improve individual and societal conditions.
Warm up Questions

* What is Compassion?
* How would you define it?
* What is its relevance to Social Work?
How can the research gains and advances being made on the concept of Compassion in various social sciences be integrated into clinical social work education and practice?
Writings of Karen Armstrong (2010) highlights that all the major religious faiths place a strong emphasis on Compassion.

There has been a growing awareness of the importance of compassion in the caring professions.
What is Compassion

* There is no universally agreed-upon definition of Compassion.
* Research studies reveals it as a positive and powerful force.
* Need to be mindful of cultural variables as highlighted by Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions theory.
Merriam –Webster Dictionary defines compassion as a “sympathetic consciousness of other’s distress together with a desire to alleviate it”

Western psychological theory proposes that compassion is a complex psychological construct that involves cognitive, affective and behavioural features.
Before we can generate compassion and love, it is important to have a clear understanding of what we understand compassion and love to be.

In simple terms, compassion and love can be defined as positive thoughts and feelings that give rise to such essential things in life as hope, courage, determination, and inner strength." - Dalai Lama
Current literature in this area indicates that Compassion is identified by three parts

- Noticing
- Feeling
- Responding

Each contributes to the process of Compassion.
Compassion has become an area of interest by researchers studying Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2009, Fredrickson, 2010), Evolutionary Psychology (Gilbert, 2014), Organizational Behaviour (Frost, 2003) and Health Studies (Youngson, 2012, Doty, 2013).
Health Care

Introducing a new international movement...

Hearts in Healthcare is a new community, established to champion compassionate care. We believe bringing like-minded people together is the first step to re-humanising healthcare around the world.
Dr Robin Youngson (2012) highlights that there is a wealth of scientific evidence that compassionate care is better for patients and can achieve better and more cost effective outcomes.

An salient example he provides is from *Journal of American Medical Association*.

A randomly assignments patients with aggressive lung cancer were given the choice of palliative care or standard medical intervention.

The palliative care group lived longer and had significantly less depressive symptoms.
Youngson asks—What has happened to Compassion in Health Care

- The sheer pace of work and multiple competing demands
- Peer pressure – unconscious norms and practices
- The perceived need for objectivity and clear judgement
- The dehumanizing effect of much technology
- Institutional rules and polices
- Organizational Culture
The PERMA Model of Well-Being

**Positive Emotion**
Positive emotions are an essential part of our well-being. Happy people look back on the past with gladness; look into the future with hope; and they enjoy and cherish the present.

**Relationships**
Everyone needs someone. We enhance our well-being and share it with others by building strong relationships with the people around us - family, friends, coworkers, neighbours.

**Accomplishment**
Everyone needs to win sometimes. To achieve well-being and happiness, we must be able to look back on our lives with a sense of accomplishment: 'I did it, and I did it well'.

**Engagement**
When we focus on doing the things we truly enjoy and care about, we can begin to engage completely with the present moment and enter the state of being known as 'flow'.

**Meaning**
We are at our best when we dedicate time to something greater than ourselves. This might be religious faith, community work, family, politics, a charity, a professional or creative goal.

From Martin Seligman's *Flourish*, 2011
Professor Barbara Fredrickson

“Positively wonderful! … Offers surefire methods for transforming our lives from so-so to joyous.”
—DANIEL GOLEMAN, author of Emotional Intelligence

POSITIVITY
Top-Notch Research Reveals the 3-to-1 Ratio That Will Change Your Life

BARBARA L. FREDRICKSON, Ph.D.
KENAN DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR, UNC—CHAPEL HILL,
AWARD-WINNING DIRECTOR OF THE PEP LAB
Professor Jim Doty

CCARE

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ALTRUISM RESEARCH AND EDUCATION
Work organisations are fraught with pain and suffering (Frost, 2003).

People often carry pain from their personal lives with them to work.

Work related factors such as conflictual co-worker relationships, bullying, or having to deal with overly difficult clients can lead individuals to experience and enduring pain.
Counselling

Compassion Focused Therapy

The Compassionate Mind

“Wise and perceptive. [It] teaches self-compassion and the consolations of kindness, I recommend it.”

SALLY BROMPTON
author of Shoot the Damn Dog

PAUL GILBERT
Compassion-focused therapy refers to the underpinning theory and process of applying a compassion model to psychotherapy.

Compassionate mind training refers to specific activities designed to develop compassionate attributes and skills, particularly those that affect emotional regulation.
Compassion focused therapy adopts the philosophy that our understanding of psychological and neurophysiological processes is developing at such a rapid rate that we are now moving beyond schools of psychotherapy towards a more integrated, biopsychosocial science of psychotherapy (Gilbert 2009).
Self Compassion

- Defined as “being open to and moved by one’s own suffering and experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, non-judgmental attitude towards one’s inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that's one's own experience is part of the common human experience. (Neff 2003)
According to Neff self compassion is associated with positive qualities including greater coping with adversity, life satisfaction, emotional intelligence, happiness, optimism and positive affect.

Self Compassion is also associated with reductions in depression, anxiety, self criticism, fear of failure and disordered eating behaviours (Neff 2003)
Proposed that compassion evolved as part of the caregiving responses to vulnerable offspring, that compassionate individuals were preferred in mate selection processes and the compassion emerged as a desirable trait in cooperative relations between non-kin.
Measuring Compassion
Compassion Scale to Others

- This tool was developed in The University of Texas by Pommier (2011) as part of her PhD dissertation.
- The tool has been tested for validity and reliability by the researchers.
- A Likert-type scale (1-5) used for scoring.
- The tool contains 24 statements grouped into 6 constructs.
Measuring Compassion to others in Social work and Nursing students

- This scale was used to measure compassion to others in entry level students enrolled in social work and nursing programmes at the Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec).
Is Compassion a skills that can be taught?

* Gilbert (2009) reports that compassion can be thought of as a skill that one can train in, with increasing evidence that focusing on and practicing compassion can influence neurophysiological and immune systems (p199).
From a Buddhist perspective, compassion can be trained through mental practices, such as mediation.

Several compassion programs now exist, including Compassionate Mind Training, Compassion-focused Therapy and Compassion Cultivation Training.
Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT)

- Offered by the Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Sanford University
- CCT combines traditional contemplative practices with contemporary psychology and scientific research to help you lead a more compassionate life
- Classes meet for 2 hours once a week for 8 weeks and daily meditation home practice is assigned.
Transfer of learning is “the degree to which student apply and maintain the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained in training to the job” [Wexley and Latham 1981 and Baldwin and Ford, 1988]
Strong Consensus

* That the acquisition of knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes is of little value if the new characteristics are not generalized to the **job setting** and **maintained** over time.
3 Critical Factors affect Transfer of Learning

1. Motivation of Transfer
2. Transfer Design
3. Transfer Climate
When learning occurs in training, the transfer climate [work environment] may either support or inhibit application of learning on the job.

Variables such as supervisory support impacts on transfer of learning.
References


Pommier, E. (2011). The compassion to others scale, University of Texas at Austin: 262.


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