

# The Importance of Practicing With Compassion

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Although most of us in the health care field might like to believe we're immune to stress, the reality is that we're so frequently exposed to crisis and tragedy that stress is an unavoidable burden.

During times of extraordinary stress, it's natural to feel not just tired, but exhausted. As workflows change to meet a growing need, as providers worry about having the resources to deliver the best care, as systems shift on a dime to launch innovative ways of working while respecting social distancing recommendations... No wonder so many of us are feeling the weight of added pressure.

It's times like these that we most need compassion—not just for each other, but also for ourselves.

Compassion isn't just nice to have. It's necessary, and it's powerful. Without compassion, health care providers are at tremendous risk for burnout, which can be accompanied by symptoms of anxiety, depression and despair. At its most extreme, burnout can leave us feeling so empty and overwhelmed that we may even contemplate suicide.

The positive impact of compassion, especially in health care, is confirmed through scientific research. One of the most well-known examples is the work of Tania Singer, PhD, and her team of researchers, who used fMRI data to confirm positive impact on the reward centers of the brain when engaging in an act of compassion\*.

Compassion is the ability to recognize suffering and making a choice to respond with a simple act of kindness. It needn't be a large gesture. It can be as simple as consciously making eye contact and smiling kindly at someone as you pass them in the hall. It might be taking an extra moment to offer comfort to a patient or their family. It might be checking in with a colleague when you know they've just worked on a really tough case to see if there's anything you can do to make things just a little easier. It might also be treating yourself like you matter, and prioritizing some much needed self-care.

Compassion can revitalize our passion for what brought us to want to do this work in the first place. It can remind us that we all share the commonality of being human, and that even on our worst day, we're all deserving of care.

\***Singer, T.**, Seymour, B., O'Doherty, J., Kaube, H., Dolan, R. J., & Frith, C. D. (2004). Empathy for pain involves the affective but not sensory components of pain. *Science*, 303(5661), 1157–1162.

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