

chapter 9

Compassion and Assertion

*If we could read the secret history of our enemies,
we should find in each [person's] life sorrow
and suffering enough to disarm any hostility.*

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I sat on the board of a meditation center for nine years, and was often struck by how its teachers expressed their views. They were compassionate about the concerns of others, but when they said what they thought, they did so clearly and often strongly, without hemming or hawing. And then they let it be, not becoming defensive or argumentative. This combination of openheartedness and directness was very powerful. It got the job done while nurturing the love in the room.

This was compassion and assertion working together. They're the two wings that get any relationship off the ground and keep it flying. They support each other: compassion brings caring to assertion, while assertion helps you feel comfortable giving compassion

since you know your own needs will be met. Compassion widens the circle of “us” while assertion protects and supports everyone inside it. They both nourish the wolf of love. In this chapter, we’ll explore brain-savvy ways to use and strengthen your inborn abilities to be compassionate and assertive, and we’ll begin with compassion.

In order to be truly compassionate, you must first feel something of what the other person is going through. You must have empathy, which cuts through the automatic tendencies of the brain that create an “us” and a “them.” So that’s where we’ll start.

EMPATHY

Empathy is the foundation of any meaningful relationship. When someone empathizes with you, it gives you the sense that your inner being truly exists for that person—that you are a Thou to his I, with feelings and needs that have standing. Empathy reassures you that he understands your inner workings at least somewhat, particularly your intentions and emotions. We are social animals, who, as Dan Siegel puts it, need to feel *felt* (2007).

Or let’s say you are the one who is offering empathy. Empathy is respectful and soothing, and it usually evokes goodwill in return. Often empathy is all the other person is asking of you; if there is still something the person needs to talk about, you can address it in a more positive atmosphere. Further, being empathic gives you lots of useful information about the other person, including what’s really on her mind, and what she really cares about. For example, if she’s being critical of you, sense down into her deeper wants, particularly the softer and younger ones. Then you’ll have a fuller picture, which will probably reduce any frustration or anger toward her. She’ll likely sense this shift in you, and become more understanding herself.

To be clear: empathy is neither agreement nor approval. You can empathize with someone you wish would act differently. Empathy *doesn’t* mean waiving your rights; knowing this can help you feel it’s alright to be empathic.

In spiritual practice, empathy sees how we are all related to each other. It is mindful and curious, with a “don’t know” quality that prevents you from getting stuck in your own views. Empathy is virtue in action, the restraint of reactive patterns in order to stay present with another person. It embodies non-harming, since a lack of empathy is often upsetting to others, and also opens the door to hurting them unwittingly. Empathy contains an inherent generosity: you give the willingness to be moved by another person.

Empathic Breakdowns

For all its benefits, empathy disappears quickly during most conflicts, and fades away slowly in many long-term relationships. Unfortunately, inadequate empathy erodes trust and makes it harder to solve interpersonal problems. Just recall a time you felt misunderstood—or worse, a time when the other person didn’t even want to understand you. A history of empathic breakdowns has effects; the more vulnerable a person is and the higher the stakes, the greater the impact. For example, insufficient caregiver empathy often leads to insecure attachment in a young child. In the larger world, empathic breakdowns lead to exploitation, prejudice, and terrible atrocities. There’s no empathy in the wolf of hate.

How to Be Empathic

Your natural capacity for empathy can be brought forth deliberately, used skillfully, and strengthened. Here’s how to work with the brain’s empathy circuits.

SET THE STAGE

Bring conscious intention to being empathic. For example, when I realize that my wife wants to have one of *those* conversations—

she's not happy about something, and it's probably me—I try to take a few seconds to remind myself to be empathic and not lame, and that it feels good to be empathic. These little steps activate the prefrontal cortex (PFC) to orient you to the situation, focus your intentions, and prime empathy-related neural networks; they also warm up the limbic system to get your brain headed toward the rewards of empathy.

Next, relax your body and mind, and open to the other person as much as feels right to you. Use the methods in the next section to feel safe and strong enough to receive the other person fully. Remind yourself that whatever is in his mind is over *there*, and you're over *here*, present with but separate from the stream of his thoughts and feelings.

Keep paying attention to the other person; be *with* him. This sort of sustained attention is uncommon, and other people appreciate it a lot. Appoint a little guardian in your mind that keeps watching the continuity of your attentiveness; this will stimulate the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which pays attention to attention. (We'll say more about this guardian in chapter 12.) In a way, empathy is a kind of mindfulness meditation focused on someone else's inner world.

NOTICE THE ACTIONS OF OTHERS

Notice the other person's movements, stance, gestures, and actions. (The point is to energize the perceptual-motor mirroring functions of your brain, not to analyze her body language.) Imagine doing these yourself. What would it feel like, in your own body, to do them? If it's appropriate, match some of her movements unobtrusively with your own, and notice what this feels like.

SENSE THE FEELINGS OF OTHERS

Tune in to yourself. Sense your breathing, body, and emotions. As we've seen, this stimulates your insula and primes it to sense the inner feelings of others.

Watch the other person's face and eyes closely. Our core emotions are expressed through universal facial expressions (Ekman 2007). They often flit by quickly, but if you're mindful, you can spot them. This is the biological basis for the old saying that the eyes are the windows to the soul.

Relax. Let your body open to resonating with the other person's emotions.

TRACK THE THOUGHTS OF OTHERS

Actively imagine what the other person could be thinking and wanting. Imagine what could be going on beneath the surface, and what might be pulling in different directions inside him. Consider what you know or can reasonably guess about him, such as his personal history, childhood, temperament, personality, "hot buttons," recent events in his life, and the nature of his relationship with you: What effect might these have? Also take into account what you've already experienced from tuning in to his actions and emotions. Ask yourself questions, such as *What might he be feeling deep down? What could be most important to him? What might he want from me?* Be respectful, and don't jump to conclusions: stay in "don't know" mind.

CHECK BACK

As appropriate, check with the other person to see if you're on the right track. For example, you might say, "Sounds like you're feeling _____, is that right?" Or, "I'm not sure, but I get the sense that _____." Or, "It seems like what bothered you was _____. Did you want _____?"

Be careful not to ask questions in an argumentative or prosecutorial way to advance your own viewpoint. And don't muddle empathy together with any disagreements you may have. Keep empathy separate from asserting yourself, and try to be clear about the transition from one to the other. For example, you might say something like,

“I get that you wanted more attention from me when we visited my relatives, and that you felt bad. It makes sense to me and I’m sorry. I’m going to be more careful about that in the future. [Pause.] But, you know, you seemed happy chatting away with Aunt Sue and didn’t tell me that you wanted more attention. If you could tell me directly what you’d like in the moment, it would be easier for me to give it to you—which is what I definitely want to do.”

RECEIVE EMPATHY YOURSELF

When you would like to receive empathy, remember that you’re more likely to get it if you are “feelable.” Be open, present, and honest. You could also ask for empathy directly; remember that some people may just not realize that receiving empathy is important to you (and to lots of others, too). Be willing to say explicitly what you would like to receive. It often helps to make it clear that it’s empathy you want, not necessarily agreement or approval. When you sense that the other person gets how it is for you, at least in some ways, let the experience of receiving empathy sink into your implicit, emotional memory.