The Importance of Compassion

By Dr Mark Crosweller AFSM

What is compassion?

Compassion begins not as an abstract virtue but as a felt orientation of the heart—a willingness to enter the landscape of another's suffering with clarity, steadiness, and moral intention. At its essence, compassion is the desire to provide something another person lacks that prevents them from achieving their happiness, wellness and ability to flourish: comfort, safety, reassurance, insight, or simply presence. To "suffer with" someone does not mean collapsing under the weight of their distress, nor does it require abandoning one's discernment. Rather, it means drawing upon the depths of our own humanity and walking beside them with a mind both open and rational, a heart both attuned and courageous. When we truly understand that suffering and vulnerability are a universal human condition and an unavoidable feature of a relational life, compassion becomes the ethical response to that same suffering and vulnerability.

Philosophy

Compassion is a concept woven through the history of human thought. Philosophers from East and West have placed it at the centre of ethical and social life. Confucius and the Buddha treated compassion as the foundation of moral cultivation. Aristotle saw ethics and politics as inseparable: a good society is necessary for people to flourish, and compassion plays a vital role in sustaining that possibility. Modern thinkers such as Hume and Schopenhauer elevated compassion as the basis for justice, moral responsibility, and human solidarity. Across traditions, compassion emerges as both a personal virtue and a social force—something that not only shapes how we live with others, but how we build communities capable of dignity and resilience.

Evolution

This philosophical heritage is matched by an evolutionary one. Compassion did not merely arise from noble sentiment; it evolved because it made human communities more survivable. Charles Darwin argued that groups who cared most for the vulnerable, who nurtured their young, and who supported the injured or disadvantaged, ultimately thrived. Evolutionary psychologists reinforce this view: compassion arises through specific appraisal patterns, distinctive emotional expressions, and approach-oriented responses that motivate helping. It likely developed for three reasons: to care for offspring, to attract cooperative mates, and to

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encourage bonds between non-kin for the sake of mutual survival. Compassion, then, is not a weakness—it is a profound biological strength.

Psychology

Psychology further enriches this understanding. Compassion is not simply a feeling but a process involving five elements: recognising suffering; understanding its universality; empathically resonating with another's distress; tolerating the unpleasant emotions that arise within oneself; and being motivated to help. Without tolerance for distress, compassion collapses into overwhelm or avoidance. Without non-judgement, compassion turns into cold analysis or moral superiority. Compassion requires a delicate interplay of emotional resonance and cognitive clarity, enabling us to remain present without being swept away.

Ethical guidance

This foundation leads into the ethical dimensions of compassion shaped by two guiding principles: do not cause unnecessary suffering, and protect others from unnecessary suffering. These echo Schopenhauer's claim that compassion is the core of morality—justice restrains us from harming others, while compassion motivates us to help. When held together, they create a vision of ethics grounded not in rules or duty, but in the recognition of our shared human longing for happiness and freedom from suffering.

The ultimate act of compassion

History has taught us through lived experience the ultimate act of compassion: the giving of one's life for another. Over the course of centuries we have borne witness to people who died while protecting others. Their actions embody compassion at its most profound level, where Self yields entirely to Other. The circumstances in which they found themselves pushed them beyond the comfortable boundaries of identity, into spaces where ego is quieted and deeper capacities emerge. Under extreme pressure—when the known world collapses—humans often reveal surprising strength, clarity, and altruism. Many step forward with courage that surpasses self-preservation. Yet for some, this willingness results in the tragic loss of their own lives.

Such sacrifices become a symbol not only of service but of the human capacity to transcend self-interest. In such moments, anger, self-importance, rigid views, and egoic attachments dissolve. Compassion fills the space left behind. Many of these individuals demonstrated what remains possible when self-concern loosens its grip: actions motivated by pure intention, free of judgement, and aligned wholly with the welfare of others. Their legacy challenges us to examine our own minds. If compassion arises naturally when ego recedes, then what prevents us from expressing compassion in ordinary life? The answer lies in how we perceive suffering—our own and others'.

Compassion and blame

Here, we must explore the tension between compassion and blame. Western philosophy, influenced by Aristotle, often ties compassion to deservedness: people are worthy of compassion if they did not bring their suffering upon themselves. Aristotle distinguished between involuntary suffering, suffering caused by ignorance or lack of will, and suffering resulting from voluntary choices. When blame is proportionate to the

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cause, compassion is withheld; when disproportionate, compassion is granted. This logic remains embedded in Western social attitudes. Combined with neoliberal ideas of self-sufficiency and perfection, it fosters self-blame, shame, and a constricted approach to compassion. Many people conclude that their suffering is evidence of personal inadequacy rather than a shared human condition.

Compassion and non-judgment

Buddhism provides a contrasting view. It teaches that all sentient beings wish to avoid suffering and find happiness. Compassion, therefore, should be universal. It must be rooted in both wisdom—understanding the nature of suffering—and loving-kindness—intimate empathy with all sentient beings. Crucially, compassion must include oneself. Without self-compassion, the heart remains divided, and compassion toward others becomes inconsistent or performative. Self-compassion involves the process of extending kindness inward, recognising suffering as a shared human experience, and holding painful thoughts and emotions with balanced awareness. Self-compassion is transformative because it reframes suffering not as failure but as part of being human. It softens the harsh edges of self-judgement, enabling the mind to open, heal, and reconnect with others.

Choices and consequences

Yet compassion is not only an individual endeavour. It is shaped by how we perceive choice, responsibility, and consequence. Outside of involuntary circumstances, many causes of suffering arise from our own choices—born from ignorance, attachment, or misperception. Recognising this does not diminish compassion; rather, it empowers us to change. We become authors of our own stories, capable of shifting the causes of suffering by transforming the states of mind that generate them. Choices rooted in ego, anger, rigidness, or ignorance create suffering; choices grounded in compassion, patience, openness, and moral clarity move us toward happiness. Every interaction becomes a crossroads: will we contribute to suffering, or alleviate it?

Compassion at scale

Even when the intention to be compassionate exists, leaders—especially in crises—face significant constraints. One of the profound challenges is scale. Humans are emotionally wired to respond compassionately to one individual but struggle to do so for many. When suffering becomes quantified—thousands dead, millions displaced—compassion diminishes. Paul Slovic describes this as "psychic numbing." Numbers lose meaning; emotional resonance fades. Leaders, inundated with information during disasters, may retreat into analytical detachment as a coping mechanism. While temporarily protective, this retreat can hinder compassionate decision-making and result in apathy or paralysis.

To counter this tendency, we can draw upon two modes of thought: the experiential (System 1) and the analytic (System 2). The experiential system operates through images, stories, and affect. It is intuitive, rapid, and emotionally charged—the foundation of empathy and moral intuition. The analytic system is slower, rational, and methodical—necessary for effective policy, systems change, and long-term planning. Compassion requires both systems. Stories ignite feeling; analysis guides responsible action. Without story, numbers remain sterile; without analysis, compassion risks becoming partial or inconsistent.

Leaders often describe how engagement with individuals—listening to their stories, seeing their faces,

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witnessing their struggles—humanises abstract data. Only through this interplay between the personal and the systemic can leaders grasp the full moral weight of suffering and respond with integrity.

The need for courage and wisdom

This perspective creates both an invitation and a challenge. Leadership demands the courage to see suffering clearly, to feel it without being overwhelmed, and to act in ways that acknowledge and alleviate it. Compassion is not merely an emotional response but a disciplined practice—a way of holding others' pain without turning away, and a way of holding our own suffering without collapsing into self-criticism. It requires balancing sentiment, symbolism, and data; integrating affect with analysis; and cultivating the wisdom to discern when to act, how to act, and on whose behalf to act.

Ultimately, compassion is relational. It dissolves the false boundary between Self and Other, reminding us that we exist in a web of interdependence. Through compassion, leaders can shape institutions and societies that honour vulnerability, protect dignity, and foster environments where people can flourish. It is both a personal discipline and a political necessity, grounded in the simple yet profound recognition that we all seek the same thing: to find happiness and be free from suffering.

Five Lessons for Leaders

1. *See Suffering Clearly—Without Turning Away.* Compassion begins with the honest recognition that all people experience difficulty, stress, disappointment, and fear. Leaders who deny suffering—whether their own or their team's—create cultures of silence, pretence, and emotional armour. But leaders who look suffering in the eye with steadiness create the conditions for trust, psychological safety, and courage. To lead compassionately is to acknowledge that struggle is part of being human, not a personal failing. This simple shift dissolves shame, opens dialogue, and creates relational depth. \
2. *Avoid Pity, Overwhelm, and "Idiot Compassion".* Pity creates distance. Emotional overwhelm makes leaders reactive. "Idiot compassion" makes leaders act from the desire to be liked rather than the courage to help. For leaders, idiot compassion is particularly dangerous—it leads to poor decisions, unclear expectations, and avoidance of necessary conversations. True compassion may require firmness, boundaries, or honest feedback. Compassion is not about being "nice"—it is about being clear, grounded, and constructive to prevent, minimise or manage harmfulness.
3. *Understand That Everyone Is Shaped by Causes and Conditions.* A compassionate leader recognises that people are not fixed entities but outcomes of many influences—upbringing, stressors, fears, environments, and histories. This insight reduces blame, softens harsh judgment, and enhances empathy. Leaders who understand this create workplaces where people can grow rather than defend themselves; where accountability is balanced with humanity; and where performance issues become opportunities for development, not condemnation.
4. *Act Wisely—Not Reactively.* Compassion is not passive. It moves into wise action—feeding the hungry, listening deeply, standing against harm, or setting boundaries when necessary. In leadership, this means responding with clarity rather than reacting out of discomfort. It means knowing when presence is needed, when direction is needed, and when change is needed.Compassion paired with wisdom recognises impermanence, change, and the deeper patterns beneath behaviour. Leaders who act from this

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place are calm, thoughtful, and steady—rather than frantic or controlling.

5. *Cultivate Inner Balance: Compassion, Equanimity, and Self-Compassion.* Without equanimity—inner balance—compassion burns out. Without self-compassion, leaders become brittle, defensive, or exhausted. Importantly, compassion must be undivided: it includes oneself as well as others. Leaders who are kind to themselves make better decisions, recover from mistakes more effectively, and lead with steadier presence. Equanimity keeps the heart open without being overwhelmed; compassion keeps leadership warm without becoming detached.

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