

The (Real) Key to a Joyful Union

IT ISN'T SEX (THOUGH IT MAY HELP ON THAT FRONT). IT ISN'T GRATITUDE, EITHER. HERE'S WHY GOOD OLD-FASHIONED COMPASSION IS WHAT A MARRIAGE NEEDS MOST

BY CAMILLE NOE PAGÁN

Your spouse forgot his credit card at a restaurant again. Sure, you could roll your eyes or snap, “When are you going to get more organized?” But if you instead say, “I’m sorry, can I help?” you will improve his day and your own in the process.

No doubt you’ve heard about the perks of optimism and gratitude. Think of compassion—the feeling of concern and/or sympathy for another’s misfortune, along with a desire to lend a hand—as their equally gifted but less hyped sister. “It’s the key to happiness and well-being,” says Thupten Jinpa, a former Buddhist monk who helped develop a landmark course in compassion training at Stanford School of Medicine. Indeed, a growing body of research shows that compassion reduces anxiety, depression and stress and may boost immunity, along with longevity.

But that’s not all: a new study of 1,500 married Americans in the journal *Family Relations* found that when spouses were humble and compassionate toward each other, they were less stressed and more satisfied in their relationships. “Other research has shown that learning to communicate well doesn’t actually improve romantic relationships the way you might expect,” says study author Jonathan Olson, an associate professor of public



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health and health psychology at Bastyr University. “But our study found that focusing on certain traits that fall under the umbrella of communication—that is, humility and compassion—does make marriages happier.” That may be because compassion, in particular, smoothes out the inevitable rough spots in a relationship: “Being able to see the other person’s perspective and want to help makes it easier to move past conflict,” explains Olson.

Hardwired for happiness

We’re born with the instinct to be nice. Even babies and toddlers have the capacity for kindness. One study in the journal *PLOS One* found that kids under the age of 2 were happier when they gave treats to another person than when they received treats themselves. Doing for others actually gives you a veritable high. Donating money lights up the brain’s pleasure centers, which are typically activated by things like food and sex, according to a study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Some experts believe that there’s an evolutionary explanation: by lending a hand, we up the odds that our species will survive, so our bodies prime us for the behavior by making helping feel good.

Simply witnessing an act of compassion triggers feelings of admiration, warmth and love, per a study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* (which may be why we click on stories about people who donate a kidney to a stranger). Compassion also curbs the natural (and anxiety-provoking) tendency to navel-gaze. “When you’re responding to someone else’s needs, your focus is off yourself,” explains Jinpa, author of *A Fearless Heart*. That can quiet self-critical thought patterns (“Do I do enough for my family?” “Do I look old for my age?”), helping you feel better overall.

The kindness cure

If compassion can make your home happier, why don’t we all practice it more often? The very fact that your partner is a capable adult may dampen your desire to jump to his or her aid, says Stan Tatkin, a psychotherapist and assistant clinical professor at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. “You may be compassionate to your kids, for example, be-

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cause they may seem more helpless and therefore are easier to empathize with.”

You might also be afraid that being that understanding when your mate messes up puts you in a bad position, but nothing could be further from the truth. “When you show your partner compassion, they’re more likely to do the same for you. In a way, you’re really helping yourself as well as your spouse, which improves your overall relationship,” points out K.C. Haydon, an assistant professor of psychology and education at Mount Holyoke College.

Then there’s the stress factor. Pressing emotions like worry can crowd out our generous nature. “With life being as hectic as it is, it’s all too easy to fall into the mind-set that you don’t have time to go out of your way for anyone else—even your own partner,” says Stefanie Ziev, a life coach in New York. “Yet compassion isn’t necessarily something big or dramatic. In many cases, it’s little actions or thoughts.” It can be as simple as saying, “Listen, I’ll pack the kids’ lunches for you today” or “Hey, I know you’re stressed about the bills, but you’re doing a great job.”

As with many things in life, the more you practice, the more natural it becomes. Here are a few strategies for starting this powerful habit.

1. Set a daily intention

For example, write “I intend to bring joy to my husband/wife today” on a Post-it and stick it on the back of your smartphone (or make it your wallpaper). This can set the tone for your entire day and may just change the outcomes of all your interactions, not just with your mate. “People tend to reflect the emotions others are projecting,” says Ziev.

2. Be mindful

The ability to focus on the present promotes

3 WAYS TO SHOW YOURSELF THE LOVE

Don’t forget to be nice to you. “About 80% of people are more compassionate to others than they are to themselves,” says Kristin Neff, an associate professor of human development and culture at the University of Texas. “There’s a misconception that self-compassion is selfish, but being kind to yourself puts you in a happier, more pleasant mind-set, and that allows you to have better relationships with others.”

1. CHECK THAT DOWNER VOICE IN YOUR HEAD

Instead of the punitive “OMG, I’m late again because my life is such a mess!” try “I deserve credit for getting my family out the door every morning.” Says Neff, “I tell my students to talk to themselves the way they would talk to a friend.”

2. ADMIT WHEN THINGS STINK

Say you’ve racked up a lot of debt, and it’s weighing on you and your partner. Or you’re trying to lose weight and can’t, but a good friend is having no trouble shedding pounds. “Rather than sugarcoating the situation, acknowledge that it’s painful, it’s part of life, and it will pass,” says Jean Fain, author of *The Self-Compassion Diet*. “Being honest about your feelings invites you to be kinder to yourself.”

3. PUT YOUR HAND ON YOUR HEART

No, really. “People respond deeply to touch, even from themselves,” says Neff. “This can send a soothing message from your body to your mind and put you in a compassionate state.”

empathy by instilling a sense of calm. To cultivate more mindfulness in daily life, “take a few minutes to meditate while sitting in a chair or walking around the neighborhood,” advises Jean Fain, a psychotherapist and instructor at Harvard Medical School. “Start by wishing good for yourself. Repeat a phrase such as ‘May I be safe, may I be happy, may I live with ease’ 5 to 10 times. Then wish the same for your friends and family.”

3. Move more

Repetitive exercise, like running, also encourages you to stay more present. In fact, aerobic exercise is more effective at cultivating mindfulness than relaxation training, found a 2014 study in *Mental Health and Physical Activity*. Researchers suspect this is because physical activity activates brain regions that control attention.

4. Hit the pause button

If your other half says something unkind in the middle of a fight, don’t snap back. Instead, take a deep breath. “That kind of behavior is almost always a distress signal that means the partner needs something they’re not getting,” says Haydon (who has watched thousands of hours of couples arguing). After pausing, try saying, “We’re having a disconnect here, and it seems like I’m not understanding what you mean. Can you try to explain it to me?” That tiny gesture can not only defuse the tension, but also lead to a positive shift—helping the two of you get on the same page.

5. Use your (positive) imagination

It’s human nature to judge others. But when your wife leaves the milk out (again), is it possible she was rushing to get the kids out the door on time? If your husband doesn’t come on to you at night, could it be he’s just dead tired? “Compassion requires you to give people the benefit of the doubt,” notes Jinpa. That doesn’t mean you should become everyone’s favorite doormat, but do your best to let unkind asides and disappointing actions go. And if you screw up, extend yourself the benefit of the doubt too—you’ll do better next time. After all, you deserve to get as much tenderness as you give.