Suppressing feelings of compassion makes people feel less moral: study

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(Medical Xpress) -- It's normal to not always act on your sense of compassion—for example, by walking past a beggar on the street without giving them any money. Maybe you want to save your money or avoid engaging with a homeless person. But even if suppressing compassion avoids these costs, it may carry a personal cost of its own, according to a new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. After people suppress compassionate feelings, an experiment shows, they lose a bit of their commitment to morality.

Normally, people assume that ignoring their compassionate feeling doesn't have any cost—that you can just suppress your sympathy and walk on. But Daryl Cameron and Keith Payne of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the authors of the paper, suspected that wasn't true. "Compassion is such a powerful emotion. It's been called a moral barometer," Cameron says. A sense of other people's suffering may even be the foundation of morality—which suggests that suppressing that sense might make people feel less moral.

The researchers showed each participant in their experiment a slideshow of 15 images of subjects including homeless people, crying babies, and victims of war and famine. Each participant was given one of three tasks. Some were told to try not to feel sympathy, some were told to try not to feel distress (an unpleasant, non-moral feeling), and the rest were told to experience whatever emotions come to them. The instructions were detailed, telling the people who were supposed to suppress an

emotion exactly what that emotion was and that they should do their best to eliminate it.

After each participant watched the slideshow, they were tested on whether they believed that moral rules have to be followed all the time and how much they cared about being a moral person.

People who had suppressed compassion did, apparently, have a change in their sense of morality: they were much more likely to either care less about being moral or to say that it's all right to be flexible about following moral rules. Cameron thinks this is because suppressing feelings of compassion causes cognitive dissonance that people have to resolve by rearranging their attitudes or beliefs about morality.

Choosing not to be kind is a common experience. "Many of us do this in daily life," Cameron says—whether it's declining to give money to a homeless person, changing the channel away from a news story about starving people in a far-off land, or otherwise failing to help someone in need. "In past work, we've shown that people suppress their compassion when faced with mass suffering in natural disasters and genocide. To the degree that suppressing compassion changes how people care about or think about morality, it may put them more at risk for acting immorally."

More information: www.psychologicalscience.org/i … sychological_science

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