

Celebration of compassion: Unique multimedia eBook presents scientists', practitioners', and therapists' experiences

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Compassion training promotes social closeness, according to Max Planck director Tania Singer. Credit: MPI for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences

Questions about the difference between empathy and compassion, or about whether compassion can be learned, are now answered by a newly

published eBook. Edited by Tania Singer and Matthias Bolz from the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, the book also explains how mental training transforms the human brain, and that compassion can reduce pain.

The eBook *Compassion: Bridging Practice and Science* has just been published and can be downloaded free of charge. It summarises fascinating results of the science of compassion, but also describes training programmes and [practical experiences](#). The book thus provides not only a unique overview of current research into empathy and compassion, but also offers an exciting way of approaching the topic for interested readers—including useful advice for everyday life.

A major part of the eBook concerns the science of compassion. Tania Singer, director of the Department of Social Neuroscience, shows how empathy differs from compassion. In a recent study, she was able to show empirically that empathy—the ability to recognize emotions experienced by others—and compassion are supported by different [biological systems](#) and neuronal networks. In other chapters, researchers from Singer's department explain how meditation-based compassion practices can reduce pain, and how compassion training can promote positive emotions and social closeness, which in turn can improve mental and [physical health](#). In another chapter, the [endocrinologist](#) Charles Raison describes how compassion training can lead to a decrease in stress-related hormones such as [cortisol](#). "With our research, and with this book, we hope to raise awareness of compassion in our society, and to support the development of a more caring and [sustainable society](#) which recognizes the importance of secular ethics and the interdependence of all beings", Singer emphasises.

Moreover, scientifically validated compassion training programmes are introduced for the first time, and expert users describe their experiences with some of these in schools, therapy, or end-of-life care situations.

These reports provide interesting, enlightening, but also touch-ing insights into the everyday-life effects of compassion training. One chapter, for example, shows how compassion training gains increasing significance for clinical staff—not only for their interactions with terminally ill or dying patients, but also for their processing of daily events, thus helping to prevent burnout-related illnesses among physicians and caretakers.

The book also provides theories and concepts of compassion from different perspectives. Paul Gilbert presents an evolutionary model of compassion, which argues that compassion is deeply rooted in our caring system. From a cognitive neuroscientific point of view, compassion is based on attentional, cognitive, and socio-affective processes, each of which draws on specific [neuronal networks](#). The book also offers a Buddhist perspective on compassion, which insists compassion must begin with the move from self- to other-centredness.

The eBook has evolved from a successful workshop, How to Train Compassion, which was organised by Singer's department in artist Olafur Eliasson's studio in Berlin back in 2011. After the event, participants all agreed that the topics shared and discussed at the workshop should be made accessible to a wider range of people. Thus, with the support of the Max Planck Society, the eBook was produced—offering its readers many videos from the workshop, sound art collages by Nathalie Singer, as well as impressive pieces of visual art by Olafur Eliasson.

More information: The eBook can be downloaded free of charge at: www.compassion-training.org

Provided by Max Planck Society

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