

# Research following trends of fostering compassion for health, wellbeing

February 9 2016, by Marjorie S. Miller

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Researchers believe awareness, compassion and empathy are core dimensions of human nature that contribute to personal development and health. With these concepts at the forefront, the College of Health and Human Development is leading a variety of research efforts.

## Caring for the caregiver

A longitudinal study led by Steven Zarit, Distinguished Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, suggests that for those caring for a loved one with dementia, getting regular breaks can be beneficial to health.

"People in long-term caregiving situations may have a higher mortality than aged-matched people who are not in these situations," he said. "We need to support these caregivers."

Adult day service programs are a practical and effective way to reduce health risks for caregivers, while providing a safe and stimulating environment for persons living with Alzheimer's disease or other [chronic illnesses](#), Zarit said.

For each day caregivers in the study used adult day services, the effects of stress on their physiological and emotional responses were reduced. A reduction in stress can translate to a decrease in a person's risk for stress-related illnesses, Zarit said.

By improving regulation of [stress hormones](#) and emotions, use of adult day services reduces the likelihood that [chronic stress](#) will cause changes such as tissue damage and weakening of the immune system that make people more vulnerable to illness, he said.

"It is our hope that our positive findings will contribute to a discussion by states and by the federal government for increased funding for caregivers of persons with dementia to use adult day services or other programs that provide respite," Zarit said. "If caregivers are supported, they can provide better care to their loved ones."

## Care in the classroom

Along with his colleagues, Mark Greenberg, Edna Peterson Bennett Endowed Chair in Prevention Research and professor of [human development](#) and psychology, is evaluating a program called Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE), which is designed to foster teachers' inner resources to deal with daily stresses and support their students.

"Teachers who are better able to manage stress may become more mindful, which can improve their mental health, and therefore their quality of teaching," Greenberg said.

The program consists of a series of two-day trainings and ongoing mentorship designed to help teachers practice and apply mindfulness to their teaching.

CARE has been piloted in a series of projects over the past three years. During the 2015–16 school year, nearly 300 teachers in New York City schools are using CARE. It is currently being funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Other partners include Penn State College of Education's Jenny Frank, Patricia Jennings at the University of Virginia and Josh Brown at Fordham University.

## **Every day matters when caring for loved ones**

Stephanie Wilson, doctoral candidate in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, found that empathic spouse responses—such as listening and providing comfort and encouragement—in couples with chronic pain improved the daily function for the partner in pain.

This improvement is not just patient self-reported. Researchers measured physical functions, such as balance and how quickly the patient could get out of a chair, Wilson said.

"The most novel aspect about this is that we are looking at people as they go about their daily lives," she said. "We are looking at perspectives of both the spouse and the caregiver. We see a 22-day snapshot of a 'day in the life' of these couples. To see systemic improvement is really promising. It sides with the notion that empathy is a good thing in people with [chronic pain](#)."

This research may help couples be more mindful of their partners in pain, she said.

"Every day matters when it comes to long-term physical function," Wilson said. "How a partner reacts today could affect their spouse a year and a half from now."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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