

Unlocking compassion in the face of mass suffering

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Dave DeSteno, a psychology professor at Northeastern. Credit: Adam Glanzman/Northeastern University

Ample [research](#) has shown that as the number of people suffering increases, our individual capacity to feel compassion stays flat or

decreases—a phenomenon known among scientists as "compassion fade," says David DeSteno, a psychology professor at Northeastern.

These are times in which compassion is essential: The toll of natural disasters, violent political uprisings, and mass migration is broadcast all day, every day online and on TV.

And yet, people are [less compassionate](#) now than they were 30 years ago, according to an analysis of data on more than 14,000 college students over the span of three decades. But DeSteno may have unlocked a way to reverse the trend.

DeSteno and Daniel Lim, who was a doctoral candidate at Northeastern when he did this research, [discovered](#) that people who have faced adversity in their own lives are more resistant to compassion fade. That's because they believe they can help, even in the face of mass suffering, DeSteno and Lim found.

"When you're presented with hundreds of thousands of people suffering, it's an overwhelming feeling," DeSteno says. "We feel we can't do anything to ease their suffering, and so we try not to let ourselves feel anything in that situation. We feel numb."

But people who've experienced their own hardships—such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or violence—know that even the smallest gesture can have a major effect, DeSteno says, because they've been on the receiving end of such small acts of kindness.

So, instead of feeling overwhelmed, such people believe in their own capacity to help. They feel effective, Lim says.

This sense of their own efficacy "allows people to actually feel the compassion and act upon it," DeSteno says.

To come to this conclusion, DeSteno and Lim first had to show that people in the U.S., a largely peaceful society, who had experienced some sort of hardship, would indeed be more compassionate to a larger number of victims.

The researchers recruited 82 people, and had them read an article about children who were affected by the civil war in the West Darfur region of Sudan. Then, half the participants were shown a photo of one suffering child, while the other half was shown a photo of eight suffering children. Immediately after, DeSteno and Lim asked the participants to rate their feelings of compassion toward the child or children.

Finally, the researchers asked each participant to complete a survey that measured the level of adversity they'd faced across six domains: "illness or injury, violence or victimization, bereavement, relationship events, socio-environmental stressors, and disasters," according to the report.

The participants who hadn't experienced much adversity didn't feel any more compassion for the group of eight children than they had for the single child, the researchers found. But the compassion felt by participants who had experienced greater adversity increased as the number of victims increased.

DeSteno and Lim then set out to discover why this was the case. They wanted to test the hypothesis that it was a person's belief in their ability to help that generated more compassion in the face of mass suffering. So, they repeated the experiment, but this time, just before asking the participants to rate their own experience with trauma, DeSteno and Lim also asked them whether they thought they could help the child or children in the photo.

The researchers found that the people who had experienced hardship also were not only more likely to feel greater compassion, they were also

more likely to believe they could help.

"It really is the belief that, "I'm able to handle this stress, and I'm able to do something to help these people," that makes us not turn away from a higher number of people suffering," DeSteno says.

The results were encouraging, Lim says, but not particularly helpful moving forward.

"We don't want to make people suffer in order to make them more compassionate," he says.

So, the researchers conducted a final experiment. This time, they led half the participants to believe that they possessed a particular personality trait that made them more effective at helping people. Then, they ran the entire test a third time.

The people who were told they could be helpful to those in need felt more compassion for the group of eight children, regardless of their [personal experience](#) with hardship.

The results spell good news for society in general. Teaching people that [compassion](#) is not a fixed capacity, but rather a skill they can strengthen—through meditation or enrolling in empathy training courses, DeSteno says—empowers them to believe in their individual ability to help.

"We can create a set of interventions that would boost a sense of efficacy in people, to make them feel good about their abilities to help other people," Lin says.

Provided by Northeastern University

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