

# The Importance of Compassion in Healthcare: Pharmacists Dispensing Compassion to Others and Themselves

Feature Article

Completed 2023

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## INTRODUCTION

Compassion in healthcare is key to both the well-being of patients as well as the wellbeing of health professionals. As pharmacists, we need to practice compassion as an essential approach to our work. Compassion needs to extend to our patients and their carers, our colleagues, other healthcare workers and to ourselves.

## DISCUSSION

### *What is Compassion?*

Compassion is defined as a feeling that arises when we are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that feeling. Research has shown that experiencing compassion is beneficial as our heart rate slows down, we secrete oxytocin, and regions of the brain linked to empathy, caregiving, and feelings of pleasure light up; which can lead to us wanting to approach and care for other people.<sup>1</sup>

Compassion is a skill that can be cultivated — through methods such as guided meditation, or group support, thus making us feel more compassionate. When we imagine what it would be like to experience another person's life and see those connections with others, we build on this feeling.<sup>2</sup>

Compassion incorporates five elements:

- Recognising suffering
- Understanding the universal experience of suffering
- Feeling for the person who is suffering
- Tolerating uncomfortable feelings and
- Being motivated to act to relieve suffering

The strong desire to alleviate suffering is the key characteristic that differentiates compassion from responses like empathy, concern and sympathy.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Benefits of Compassion in Healthcare*

Research has shown that compassionate healthcare provision enhances better health outcomes for patients. Some of these outcomes include enhanced immune function, wound healing, neuroendocrine function, less cardiovascular events, and a reduction in recovery time. Additional benefits include reduced experiences of pain, anxiety, depressive symptoms, lower levels of distress and suffering. This results in an enhanced efficacy of treatment, improved patient well-being and a better quality of life.<sup>4</sup>

It has also been highlighted that compassion enhances the clinical quality of care provided by healthcare workers due

to their enhanced commitment, higher levels of diligence and meticulousness, and an improved therapeutic alliance between healthcare providers and patients. Not only does this lead to fewer clinical errors, but also improves patient safety and patient-centered care.<sup>4</sup> As pharmacists, we are in a unique position where we can build fundamental relationships with patients through means of compassion, resulting in high levels of trust. Pharmacists can readily become pillars of society despite already being among the most trusted health professionals in the world.

Provision of compassionate care is dual-ended, as it benefits healthcare providers as much as it benefits patients. Through psychological, neurobiological, physiological, professional, and social mechanisms, healthcare professionals who provide compassionate care have improved self-esteem, reduced rates of burnout, increased resilience, improved health and well-being, encouraging an improvement in job satisfaction and a better workplace culture.<sup>4</sup>

Compassionate healthcare is also beneficial to the financial performance of healthcare organisations. When there are better patient outcomes, there is a reduction in costs due to factors such as reduced complications and unplanned readmission, and also lowering the risk of malpractice lawsuits. Likewise, improved staff retention and performance as well as reduced absenteeism all contribute to a reduction in the costs for a healthcare organisation.<sup>4</sup>

### *Self-Compassion and Self-Care*

Self-care is essential for all healthcare workers. A lack of self-care will lead to burnout and ultimately poor mental and physical health. Hence why self-compassion is an essential tool in our self-care kit. Self-compassion is simply the process of turning compassion inwardly towards ourselves. Having compassion for oneself is really no different to having compassion for others. Self-compassion is when we are kind and understanding rather than harshly self-critical at times when we fail, make mistakes or feel inadequate. We give ourselves support and encouragement rather than being cold and judgmental when challenges arise in our lives. With self-compassion, we give ourselves the same kindness and care we would give to a good friend. Research indicates that self-compassion is one of the most powerful sources of coping and resilience we have available to us, radically improving our mental and physical wellbeing. It motivates us to make changes and reach our goals — not because we are inadequate, but because we care and want to be happy.<sup>5,6</sup>

Self-compassion includes three elements:

- Self-kindness versus self-judgement
- Common humanity versus isolation
- Mindfulness versus over-identification

Self-compassionate people recognise that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties are inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals. Self-compassion involves recognising that suffering and personal inadequacy are part of the shared human experience — something we all go through rather than something that happens to “me” alone.

It also requires taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. This involves putting our own situation into a larger perspective. It also stems from the willingness to observe our negative thoughts and emotions with openness and clarity, so that they are held in mindful awareness. Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, receptive state of mind in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them. Mindfulness requires that we not be “over-identified” with thoughts and feelings so we don't get caught up and swept away by negative reactivity.<sup>6</sup>

Self-compassion can be tender, involving comforting and reassuring ourselves that we are not alone, while also being present with our pain. Fierce self-compassion tends to involve protecting, providing for, and motivating ourselves. Sometimes we need to stand tall and say no, draw boundaries, or fight injustice. Contrarily, we may need to say yes to ourselves, to do what is needed to be happy rather than prioritising the needs of others. If we get stuck in bad situations or harmful habits, it means doing something differently. Not because we are unacceptable as we are, but because we care.<sup>7</sup>

The act of self-compassion does not indulge in self-pity, which tends to emphasise egocentric feelings of separation from others to exaggerate the extent of personal suffering. Self-compassion is not self-indulgence. By contrast, it involves making changes for the better, which are not necessarily easy or comfortable. Self-compassion is an important motivating factor to bring about change rather than being self-indulgent, which can lead to becoming “stuck” or trying to motivate ourselves through guilt or shame. Additionally, self-compassion differs from self-esteem. While both self-esteem and self-worth are important, trying to bolster them can lead to a narcissistic obsession where

we ignore our faults and failings. Lastly, self-compassion is not based on self-evaluation. All human beings deserve compassion and understanding irrespective of their traits or characteristics. Self-compassion allows you to accept and feel good about yourself as you are without having to feel superior to other people. It is associated with greater emotional resilience, more accurate self-concepts, more caring relationship behaviors, as well as less narcissism and reactive anger.<sup>8</sup>

### *What About Compassion Fatigue, Empathic Distress and Emotional Burnout?*

Some healthcare workers try to distance themselves from those receiving care as they fear becoming drained or even traumatised through over-identification. There are still many who believe we need to “toughen up” to survive as healthcare professionals. However, as discussed above, compassion can enhance our well-being and bring forth higher quality healthcare.

We often hear terms such as compassion fatigue, empathic distress, and emotional burnout in relation to working in healthcare. There is still a lot of debate as to how to define these terms. It would seem that empathic distress occurs when we lose differentiation between ourselves as health care providers and our patients. Compassion provides greater protection as it involves motivation to relieve the distress and thus we are empowered to act, not just feel the suffering. Compassion involves a mindful approach, where we are aware of our emotions and can distance ourselves from them. Thus, we have greater cognitive ability and clarity of thinking which enables us to respond to the needs of other people and act to alleviate their suffering. Thus, compassion is cognitive empathy. On the other hand, emotional burnout may be the result of an intense and repetitive empathic state of mind often referred to as empathic distress.<sup>9, 10</sup>

### *How Can Pharmacists Embrace Compassion for Others and For Themselves?*

Self-care practices need to commence during student years. Studying pharmacy can be stressful due to the demanding nature of the course. In addition, pharmacy students participate in experiential placements in both community and hospital pharmacy, and many students also have part-time roles working as pharmacy assistants. Self-care practices, the concept of compassion, and especially self-compassion should be taught to pharmacy students as part of the university curriculum. Students could then begin practising compassion from their earliest contact with members of the public.

In day-to-day practice, compassion for patients involves treating them with dignity and respect. As pharmacists, we need to listen to patients and ensure that we understand their individual needs and priorities. We need to show interest in each patient and investigate their understanding and beliefs about their health and their treatment. This is patient-centered care. When we listen well, we can better respond to their needs. During a difficult conversation with a patient, if we can show our understanding, they will be more likely to accept our advice. Communication with compassion also dissipates tension when we have to address a sensitive topic or modify the expectations of a patient. Pharmacists providing compassionate care also solidifies pharmacists as being one of the most approachable and trusted health professionals in practice. In the pharmacy workplace, our compassion should also extend to our colleagues. Respectful communication can be robust but must involve consultation, listening and a compassionate response. A compassionate workplace values each individual, recognising their strengths and providing support when needed, thus facilitating teamwork. A workplace culture that includes compassion is a safe place to learn from our mistakes and an ideal environment for teaching and education.

Reflecting on personal experience, one of the authors reports: *“As someone who has just finished a four-year pharmacy degree and is heading into my internship, I can truly reiterate the importance of self-care and compassion whilst studying. It is without question that I experienced significant highs and lows throughout my degree, juggling university and home life. At times, it was a real struggle with my mental health and I could feel myself experiencing high degrees of burnout. I can honestly say that seeking help and practising mindfulness and self-care was a pivotal part of overcoming these stresses. I learned that it is okay to take care of yourself and put your needs in front of others. It is okay to seek help and admit that you can't do it all on your own. It is these elements that I am carrying with me into my internship.”*

## **CONCLUSION**

Providing compassion to those we encounter in our pharmacy work, whether colleagues or those in our care, will increase our well-being and increase satisfaction with our role. In addition, there will be better outcomes for those in our care if we display compassion. Self-compassion is empowering and an essential component of our self-care, which will enhance our resilience. As pharmacists, we need to cultivate compassion and self-compassion to provide

excellent care and to flourish. Education about self-care, self-compassion, and compassion should commence at university as part of the curriculum for all degrees in pharmacy. Together, if we all practice compassionate care and self-care, we can contribute to improving all aspects of healthcare.

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