

# BACKGROUND TO COMPASSION

## WHAT IS COMPASSION?

At its core, compassion involves really *seeing* the other. It means recognizing the humanity in all - understanding that we all suffer, all have rights, needs, and wants, and all deserve understanding and respect.

From that follows an important way of relating to others: **compassion involves sensitivity to suffering in oneself and others, with a commitment to alleviate it.**

**This potential is hard-wired.** Science suggests that compassion evolved from the mother-child relationship to help whole societies work and live together. It's what allowed hunter-gather groups to succeed in unbearably harsh conditions. It's what has led to modern day innovations like medicine, national health services, and social security.

The problem is, that tendency can be dialed-down or switched off. "**Barriers to compassion**" exist which work to prevent individuals from receiving or offering compassion. Factors such as **growing up in a competitive or threatening environment, pervasive inequalities of wealth, a culture emphasizing conflict and competition, strong group identities, and detachment from those affected** by one's callousness can lead to one's own sense of compassion being severely diminished. To help cultivate compassion in individuals, we have to create compassionate environments.



WATCH PROF PAUL GILBERT TALK ABOUT THE FUNDAMENTALS OF COMPASSION



## WHY COMPASSION?

Scientific research provides robust evidence that compassion profoundly improves wellbeing and functioning from the individual to the societal level. At the individual level, people who cultivate compassion through regular practices like loving-kindness meditation **exhibit boosts in positive emotions, life satisfaction, and healthy vagal tone**. Interpersonally, social connection centered on compassion builds trust, cooperation, and reciprocal altruism within groups. **Compassion dissolves barriers between "in-groups" and "out-groups"**, reducing prejudice in favor of humanizing those seemingly different from us.

At organizational levels, **business leaders rated highly compassionate elicit 63% more trust from employees**.

**Workplace compassion reduces exhaustion and departures while elevating teamwork.**

Societally, compassion shapes policy priorities centered on human dignity, equity of opportunity, assistance for the disadvantaged, and nonviolence.

**Nations ranking higher in compassion have better health outcomes and child wellbeing.**

In essence, compassion positively transforms life across micro to macro levels - from empowering individuals' growth to driving systemic reforms for the common good. It represents both our inner seed of goodness and outer catalyst for justice.

## HOW DO WE WANT TO GOVERN?

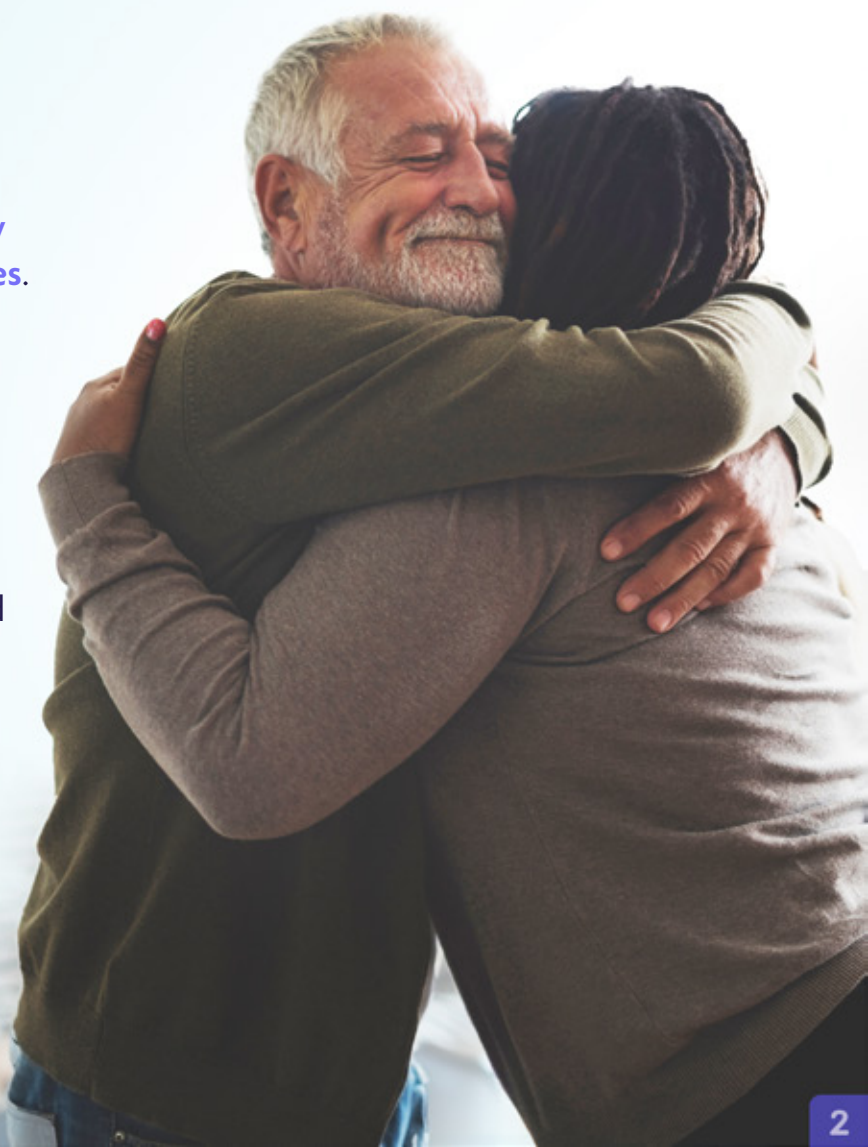
Compassion is not just an individual behavior. It's about how we choose to organize societies.


Broadly speaking, **humans have essentially manifested two ways to manage resources**.

One is to "care and share" - distributing resources across the community. This is based on a recognition of mutual need and a desire to help others.

The other is "control and hold". This leads individuals to seek resources at the expense of others and to hoard and guard them even when poverty and hardship endure.

Compassion science has found that these two organizing principles lead to distinct neural responses. When we are acting with kindness and benevolence, the more callous motives get dialed down or switched off completely. The same can happen in reverse.





If we want to live in a world based on care and share, we need to cultivate and spread compassion.

And we need to do this urgently. Complex, international issues like climate change, endemic inequality, and the rise of AI will require new forms of leadership - leadership that sees beyond tribes and nations and instead can embrace the wellbeing of humanity. We can only reach that perspective - and sustain it in the face of stress, fear, and opposition - when we cultivate the wisdom, courage, and strength of compassion.

## **PUBLIC DESIRE FOR COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP**

The desire for more compassionate politics among voters is evident in surveys, as demonstrated by **recent findings that 60% of the British public think politicians are not compassionate enough.**

In contrast, only 9% felt that politicians are already compassionate. This clear preference for increased compassion in political leadership highlights a growing recognition among voters for a more empathetic and understanding approach from their elected representatives.

**Moreover, 61% of those who view politicians are insufficiently compassionate agree that if leaders were more compassionate, they would be more likely to participate in politics.**