

IN BRIEF: Definitions – Compassion

Compassion

Compassion — because it's a motivation — emanates from the emotional and/or mental “bodies.” Compassion is sometimes confused with empathy, sympathy, pity, and charity. Its applications — compassion awareness, compassion bypass, compassionate action, and applied compassion — can also be confusing. The definitions below may help to clarify the differences.

Compassion — A feeling of deep sympathy and concern for one who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.

Compassion Advocacy — The act of raising awareness about the nature and need for compassion.

Compassion Bypass — A form of self-gratification in which one thinks about compassion in the belief that they're feeling it. When compassion bypass is turned into action, it can take the form of gratuitous behavior designed to make the person presenting with it believe that they are truly compassionate when, in fact, they have no emotional investment in the act and the act has done nothing to directly alleviate suffering.

A person may present with compassion bypass for the purposes of impressing others with the appearance of compassion or as a means to avoid the commitment, emotional investment, or difficulty associated with compassionate action.

Compassionate Action — Taking personal responsibility for alleviating and preventing suffering. This requires courage, competency, and commitment. There are three questions, which answered in the positive, confirm compassionate action —

- Does the act prevent or respond to suffering?
- Does the person exercising the compassionate act have an emotional connection to the suffering?
- Does the exercise of the compassionate act exact some form of payment (physically, emotionally, mentally, environmentally, and/or spiritually) from the person exercising that act?

Applied Compassion — The practice of employing compassion in specific cases as part of the process to prevent or alleviate suffering.

Degrees of Suffering

First Degree — Necessary Suffering

Any suffering resulting from attachment to a hoped-for outcome that is not seriously injurious. Examples are: being passed over for promotion, having a favorite team lose a game, and arriving at a shop to find it is closed. Compassion goal: relief by listening, bearing witness, and providing support.

Second Degree — Non-life-threatening Suffering

Any suffering that is injurious but not life-threatening. Examples are bodily injury, loss of a loved one, serious economic loss, doing “soul-crushing” work, mental illness, and humiliation. Compassion goal: immediate relief by removing the source of injury, minimizing the impact of the injury, and/or providing support.

Third Degree — Life-threatening Suffering

Any suffering in which the reasonable chance of a fatal outcome is present. Examples include domestic violence, terminal disease, war, starvation, exposure to extreme elements, ethnic cleansing, and suicide ideation. Compassion goal: immediate response to alleviate the situation and, if no other recourse is available, providing comfort.

Related Terms

Empathy — The intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.

Sympathy — The fact or power of sharing the feelings of another, especially in sorrow or trouble.

Pity — Sympathetic or kindly sorrow evoked by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, often leading one to give relief or aid or to show mercy.

Charity — Generous actions or donations to aid the poor, ill, or helpless.



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