Cultivating Compassion
by Paul Gilbert

Why do we need compassion?

We need compassion because life is hard. We are all susceptible to diseases and injuries. Every one of us has a lifespan that had a start and will have an end. Just like you, I am vulnerable to disease. Just like you, I could have a blood test tomorrow that says my life is going to end. Just like you, I could hear that my son has been killed in a car crash.

Because these things can happen to any of us at any time, we're all in this together. No one—no one—escapes. And the more we work together, the more we can make this journey of suffering bearable. The Buddhist tradition puts it this way: "Just like me, you want to be happy; just like me, you want to be free of suffering." That recognition of common fear and yearning is the basis for compassion.

But compassion isn't always easy. I take a fairly simple general view of compassion, which is that it is "a sensitivity to suffering with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent that suffering." We don't confuse it with other positive emotions, like love, because the hardest forms of compassion are for people you don't love. It's also harder to be compassionate toward people who seem very dissimilar from you than toward people who are like you. These are just some of the factors that can inhibit compassion.

Life experiences can also diminish our ability to give and receive compassion. I'm a therapist, and people who come to therapy are often caught in psychological loops that prevent them from accepting compassion from others or from themselves.

But we can break those loops by becoming aware of how our brains work—by becoming aware of own awareness. We can then begin to deliberately cultivate compassion by learning to cultivate compassionate attention, compassionate thinking, compassionate feeling, and compassionate behavior. We learn to be open to suffering in others as well as to suffering in ourselves—and then we can act to alleviate that suffering.

The trouble with brains

We are all biologically created. Our brains are created by our genes; they were not created by us, but for us by evolution, and as such we discover our brains can do wonderful things (find ways to cure disease) and terrible things (make war). So the way our brains have evolved means it can give us a lot of trouble, actually—and the trouble arises from the fact that we really have two brains.

We have an old brain, which has a whole lot of motives and desires that evolved long ago

and that we share with many other animals. So just like your family dog, we are naturally motivated to avoid things that could harm us, and we can be territorial, possessive, and concerned with status. We are also motivated to form friendships, reproduce, and care for offspring. And just like our family dog, we can experience emotions of anxiety, fear, anger, lust, and joy.

But we are very different from other animals, too. About two million years ago one of our primate ancestors started to evolve humanlike intelligence, and we are now capable of imagining, reasoning, using language, and using symbols. This “new” brain is fabulous when used wisely, but much depends on how it interacts with the old brain.

For example, imagine a zebra spots a lion and runs away—that’s what the older, animal brain is good at: detecting and responding to threats. If the zebra gets away, it will settle down and go back to the herd and start happily eating again. But that won’t happen for a human because of the new brain. The human will start thinking, “Oh my god, can you imagine what would’ve happened if I got caught?” They wake up in the middle of the night thinking, “What about tomorrow? And the children! Oh my god.”

The threat is over, but the new brain can’t let it go. We ruminate, and we run simulation after simulation in our minds of “what-if” scenarios. Now, of course, this can be very useful for working out how to avoid lions in the first place, or to make a spear. But it can also trap us in fear.

This is what we call emotional memory. I’ll give you another example, this time closer to the modern world. Suppose that you like holidays. When you think about holidays, it makes you excited. But then on one holiday you get severely beaten up and robbed, and you end up in the hospital. What will happen the following year when you think about holidays? Well, that trauma memory will come back, and so holidays are no longer pleasant to you.

The same mechanism is at work with the child who’s loved in the morning but whose parent gets drunk and beats him up at night. The attachment system—the parts of the brain that facilitate loving connection with our parents—fuses with the fear system. So as that child grows up and begins to feel connection with other people, he is opening up the attachment system—but unfortunately, in his emotional memory, attachment is also toxic. That person now has a mental health problem.

A lot of people with mental health problems are in loops they can’t escape. They ruminate about things that frighten them, they ruminate about being no good or inferior. They focus on all the negative aspects. This is not their fault, because we have a natural, old-brain threat bias. As Rick Hanson notes, the brain is Velcro for negative- and threat-based things but Teflon for positive ones. We’re all like this.

How does mindfulness help fix the trouble?

Fortunately, we also have the skills to reconcile the old brain with the new. One of them is a technique that we call mindfulness—moment-to-moment awareness of thoughts and feelings. That is, we have the capacity to be aware of awareness, and to simply observe and become familiar with the tricks our minds play on us.

This is a phenomenally important evolutionary quality, almost like a quality of developing a visual system. Before animals had the capacity to be aware of light, there was no awareness of light. But of course light exists. We now have a brain to be aware of being aware, which no other animal has—and this actually puts on our shoulders fantastic responsibilities, because we can wake up to the reality of the life we're in and start to make healthy choices as a result. Chimpanzees cannot do this—they can't look at their body and think, "Oh my God, I've got to lose weight."

Mindfulness helps us understand that attention is like the spotlight—whatever it shines on is what becomes brighter in the mind, which can even affect us physiologically.

Try this: Deliberately imagine your excitement around a vacation, or the possibility of winning a lottery. Let that be your focus for a minute of two and notice what happens in you body. Then switch your attention (on purpose) to an argument or one of your core worries at the moment. Notice what happens in your body. Did you feel very differently, according to where your attention was focused?

Attention also puts things outside the spotlight, into darkness. Let's say you go Christmas shopping and enter 10 shops, and in nine shops the assistants are very helpful to you, but in one shop the assistant is very rude and she makes you wait. Well, whom do you think about when you go home? "God, where do they get these people from?" you say to yourself. "Should I write to the store manager and get her fired? She was so rude." You're in a loop now and you're in the anger system. You've forgotten all the shop assistants who were nice to you. They're in darkness because the spotlight is on the rude one. How absolutely extraordinary that we can forget 90 percent of our experience!

But of course once we notice what the mind is up to—and why—then we can begin to take control over our attention and use it mindfully and practically. What about if you, on purpose, decide that you're going to recall the other nine people? Just spend time remembering how kind one of them was in that shop, another's smile, how one tried so hard to find you the thing you wanted.

Taking that step—breaking out of the anger loop—requires intention. And that intention is a key to cultivating compassion.

Compassion is rooted deeper in brain systems having to do with intentionality and motivation, and if you orient yourself to compassion, then you're going to change the whole orientation of your mind. And the key here is to understand that we can select, on purpose, one of our basic motivational systems—for caring—and we can cultivate it, help it grow and mature, through practice. We also need to understand exactly why it's useful to do this: because it changes our brain and will give us much more control over our thoughts and our lives.

So in therapy that tries to develop compassion, we train people to remember, remember, remember, notice, notice, notice kindness—and then to build upon those remembrances. Buddhist monk and author Matthieu Ricard says our minds are like gardens and they will grow naturally. But if uncultivated, they are influenced by the weather and whatever seeds are in the wind. Some things will grow big and others shrivel—and in the end we may not like the results.

We can come to understand why and how to cultivate compassion within us, which has the capacity for healing and reorganizing our minds such that we can begin to become the people we want to be—in other words, to have the garden-mind we want. This

requires courage. If you’re an agoraphobic, compassionate behavior isn’t sitting at home eating chocolates, because that’s easy. Compassion is going out and confronting your anxieties.

With our male clients we often talk about two types of courage. There is physical courage, which many of them have, but there is also emotional courage, which is being able to move into areas of deep suffering and pain. Compassion helps us to move in those areas. We must be prepared to confront pain in ourselves—and to alleviate that pain.

So here is the situation. The brain we have inherited from millions of years of evolution is both a gift and a curse, if not understood and used wisely. It is easy for us to get lost in our very basic emotions and motives, or become personally distressed by the problems of others.

But evolution has also given us a very different type of attention—an extraordinary competency as miraculous as the ability to see light—that can sense and experience consciousness of consciousness itself. From here we can begin to see into the nature of the mind—and begin to make choices about what emotions we want to cultivate in our lives. This is what it means to wake up and to start to become enlightened.