



## Acting with Compassion in the Dark Winter

The impact of COVID 19 has taken a downward turn in this holiday season and is compounded by less daylight. How do we maintain a compassionate stance towards others when ideas of how to respond are sometimes in conflict? Wisdom from the work we have been doing over the past three years on compassion resilience offers us guidance.

In the Compassion Resilience Toolkits we define the Compassionate Action Steps which apply to all settings of our lives. Here's what the 6 steps might look as we communicate with each other during these trying times...

**1. Notice – Be present in the moment and able to recognize signs of distress.**

Noticing requires that our minds be present to our environment and the people with whom we share it. It's an intentional act and not easy when there is so much distraction right now. Imagine a call from a family member who wants to talk about how overblown all this seems and how the traditional family gathering for the holiday should happen as previously planned. And then

imagine that you have just found out that a close friend is in the hospital with COVID 19. Can you be present to both your relative's distress and yours? Start by taking a breath and deciding to listen rather than react. Remind yourself that, *"He is expressing distress."*

**2. Self-check – Be aware of your initial thoughts and feelings.**

Our next and very important step is to take a moment to turn inward. What are your initial thoughts and feelings about your relative's perspective? What judgement are you making related to his current experience of pain. This moment of turning inward allows you to set aside your initial ideas and emotions in order to consider

# Creating Light in the “Dark Winter”

a compassionate response. You may be aware of thoughts such as these: *“Is he kidding me! Has he heard the number of deaths in the past week?! Wait until he hears about my friend!”* Can you set these initial reactions aside to hear more from your relative?

### 3. Seek understanding – Listen with curiosity to comprehend the other’s perspective.

As you listen, do you hear any feelings from your relative that you can relate to having at some point along this current journey? Is it possible that that, not unlike many of us, your family member is feeling a deep need to be with family and is feeling frustration and sadness that this looks highly unlikely? Do you ever hear things you do not want to hear and initially challenge the truth of it? When we are the ones challenging reality, we often call it healthy skepticism and yet may not take such a kind stance when judging others! As you listen, see if you can hear any strengths that your relative may need to be able to solve their own frustration. For example, you may hear something like, *“Even if they’re right, we don’t have to worry since, unfortunately, our oldest family member is under 65!”* The goal of this step is to gain some understanding of how the person is feeling and what strengths they bring to the distress.

### 4. Cultivate empathy – Genuine concern based your connection to what the other person is feeling.

We might think that we need to figure out if someone’s feelings deserve the label of suffering before we choose compassion. As we step out of judgment, we become more open to understanding other’s feelings. We can relate to feeling frustrated that we cannot have our beloved traditional holiday and a need to push back some just to be able to let it all sink in. As we feel empathy, our desire and intention to be helpful increases.

### 5. Discern best action – Co-plan with the person to figure out what would be helpful to them.

In this stage, we begin to repeat back to the person what we have heard related to their feelings and their strengths. We ask what they would like to do and how we can be helpful. The goal is for the person to bring solutions to their distress that are relevant to them rather than us giving advice. One might say, *“Sounds like the holiday restrictions around COVID-19 are frustrating to you because, even if it is true, you feel pretty safe and you see connecting through our traditions as a top priority. What usually helps you to deal with frustration?”* Maybe your family member identifies that they cannot do much to change other’s decisions but could find some fun, meaningful and safe way to connect. With your acceptance of their feelings and spotlight on their strengths, they will very likely be able to think about alternative responses to their pain.

### 6. Take action – Be aware that intention alone is not compassionate action.

That means that you follow-up and routinely connect with this person.

You may be wondering, Hey, what about my distress over the news I just got about my friend in the hospital?! Turns out compassion is a two-way street. By offering compassion even when you are experiencing distress, you have increased the possibility that your relative will be able to respond to you in kind. Keep the conversation going—it is your turn!

**Practice compassion, we need it now more than ever!**

Visit [compassionresiliencetoolkit.org](https://compassionresiliencetoolkit.org) for free resources. Steps for Compassionate Action come from the Combined works of Monica Worline, *Awakening Compassion at Work*, 2017 and Beth Lown, *Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare*, 2014.

Learn more ways to “Create Light in the Dark Winter” with our other new blogs: [Boundaries](#); [Compassion Fatigue and Self-compassion](#); [Expectations and Structure](#); [Mindfulness](#); and [Stress Resilience](#).