



Responding with Compassion when Perspectives are Different



Reactions to COVID-19 are on a roller coaster for many of us but not always in sync. What do we do when we are in a relatively calm and grateful space and someone calls with the latest news, inviting us back into the swirl of uncertainty? Or, when we are feeling a need to talk about our fears and the person we turn to offers the rose-colored glasses we just took off an hour ago! 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 [Steps of Compassionate Action](#) 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 friend who wants to talk about how overblown all this seems. And then imagine that you have just found out that a family member has



tested positive for COVID-19. Can you be present to both your friend'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 friend's perspective? What judgment 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 a compassionate



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response. You may be aware of thoughts such as these: *"Is he kidding me! Has he heard the numbers coming out of Italy?! Wait until he hears about my family member!"* Can you set these initial reactions aside to hear more from your friend?

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

As you listen, do you hear any feelings from your friend that you can relate to having at some point along this current journey? Is it possible that, not unlike many of us, your friend really wants this to be a short blip in their experience and being told on an hour-by-hour basis that it would not be, was frustrating to them? Do you ever hear things you do not want to hear and initially challenge the truth of it? When we do it 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 friend may need to be able to solve his own frustration. For example, you may hear something like, *"Even if they're right, I don't have to worry!"* 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.

The goal of being compassionate towards others' suffering might lead us to believe that we first need to figure out if someone's feelings deserve the label of suffering. As we step out of judgment, we become more open to understanding other's feelings. We can certainly relate to feeling frustrated that the new information is pouring in like a monsoon and a need to push back some just to be able to take it all 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 constant information about COVID 19 is frustrating to you because, even if it is true, you feel pretty safe. What usually helps you to deal with frustration?"* Maybe your friend identifies that they cannot do much to stop the flow, but they can turn down the reception! Maybe they choose an activity that can replace the TV news time. Maybe your friend asks you to check in with them on a regular basis. They will very likely know what they need.



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

That means that you follow-up and routinely connect with this friend. You may be wondering, *"Hey, what about my distress over the news I just got about my family member?"* Turns out compassion is a two-way street. By offering compassion even when you are experiencing distress, you have increased the possibility that your friend 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!
Find free resources [here](#).

*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.*