

Being compassionate in today's world

Modern society faces a unique situation regarding suffering and compassion, mainly due to the prevalence of media. People today witness massive amounts of violence and tragedy without necessarily having to be present or involved with the situations surrounding them, as was the case with the wars, famines, plagues, and other disasters of ages gone by.

You sit down to watch a bit of television after a long day at work, and what do you see? On drama shows, you may see graphic shootings and an amazing array of troubles, woes, dangers, and fears. On news shows, you'll see a string of reports and stories about intense, often violent situations. Some tragedies are real, some are fiction, and most of the time it is difficult to distinguish between the two.

How do you respond to so many disasters as you sit comfortably on your couch or recliner? How many people have you watched be killed from the comfort of your home? Do you respond any differently to the real disasters than you do to the fictional ones?

The relatively recent explosion of news media has to some degree numbed the viewing public to their own compassion. I mean, just moments ago I had the television on and heard a quick teaser for news at 11 with a fast-paced professional news-anchor voice rushing to say, "We'll tell you about a local fire where several children were killed."

How can you feel compassion for each situation when you are constantly bombarded by disasters, any of which would have been the talk of the town in centuries gone by?

Watching the news compassionately

I witnessed a concentrated example of how compassion can be numbed when I left a decade of monastic life and began to work as an editor for one of the news stations in Los Angeles. Not only did I see intensely dramatic stories, but I saw them over and over while piecing the video footage together for broadcast. To be sure, this footage was a far cry from the spiritual wisdom videos I had been editing during the previous ten years!

News people have to learn not to let the disasters “get to them.” You might say that they have to turn off their compassion to some degree, or they would be crying at every story. As just one of many examples of how numbed news people can become, whenever the Los Angeles police chased a car (which was a fairly common occurrence), our newsroom folks would watch all the angles of coverage on the television monitors that lined the newsroom walls. Several times, someone would go around the newsroom taking actual bets on whether the driver would live or die, as cheering or jeering filled the room, depending on who had won or lost the bet.

When you watch the news, understand that decisions are being made by people who live and breathe news, and who may see a horrific story as just another way to entice viewers to watch their show. Your mission as a spiritually aware person is to not get dragged into complacency, numbness, or anxiety, but to watch, care, trust, and remain anchored in spiritual awareness and faith all at the same time.

Compassion is often a byproduct of properly digested suffering. If you feel a sense of compassion for someone who is suffering — especially from a situation you have previously gone through — you’re giving a signal to the conscious universe that you’ve got the message. You’ve properly digested your suffering from that challenge and have transformed your suffering into compassion for others.

With this shift from suffering into compassion, you won’t necessarily have to go through the same kind of sufferings over and over in your life, as the same lessons come again and again, trying to break the shell of your heart to release the sweet nectar of compassion.

The lessening of suffering for yourself and others is just one of many ways that spiritual virtues help to create a happier life and a better world. More compassion, humility, honesty, and empathy equal less suffering.

Be Careful

Having compassion for those who are suffering doesn't always have to translate into making efforts to relieve them of suffering. Sometimes you're not able to help, and at other times, you may see people who are learning important lessons by going through certain hardships. These occasions are where your spiritual discernment comes in handy, allowing you to look at a situation and decide whether and how to express your compassion outwardly.

Spiritual Wisdom

Wise words about doing unto others

Being helpful to others is one of the primary tenets of spirituality and humanity. Here are some wonderful words of guidance about the Golden Rule:

- "What is unpleasant to thyself, that do not do unto thy neighbor. This is the whole law. All else is exposition."
— Hillel
- "Try to do to others as you would have them do to you and do not be discouraged if they fail sometimes. It is much better that they should fail than that you should."
— Charles Dickens
- "Behave to your servants as you desire God to behave to you."
— Philo
- "Love thy neighbor as thyself."
— Matthew 23:39
- "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."
— Dalai Lama
- "We may wonder, whom can I love and serve? Where is the face of God to whom I can pray? The answer is simple: That naked one. That lonely one. That unwanted one who is my brother and my sister. If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."
— Mother Teresa