

Empathy vs Compassion & other key concepts in Wash your Web

These pages are designed to help to clarify some key concepts behind using the WASH your WEB psychological tool. Specifically, these are:

1. Empathy vs Compassion
2. Suppression vs Repression
3. Anticipation and other healthy defence mechanisms
4. The principles of Exposure Therapy

For clarity and understanding, I have tried to decipher complex brain processes that we have not as yet fully unravelled. The result is that things here may sound more clear-cut and straight-forward than they really are.

1. Empathy vs Compassion

It is better to have compassion backed up by empathy than for empathy to work overtime.

EMPATHY.

The word “empathy” comes to us from the Greek:

Em (with) + pathos (feeling).

So empathy means *feeling with someone*. We humans are social creatures; we make use of empathy everyday just to get along and understand each other. Empathy helps us make a good connection with people around us; even strangers. I like to think of empathy as *being attuned* with others. Because empathy is a feeling and can't be seen, there are many musical expressions for how we get along:

*we're on the same wavelength,
I get a good vibe from that person,
I struck a chord with him,
I clash with her,
we're in harmony,
we're out of sync,
I wish he would tone himself down.*

People in helping industries rely on one-on-one empathy to build rapport and engage someone; it says *I understand, I get you*. It's *walking in someone else's shoes*. *Walking in someone else's shoes* helps us understand, but it can also bring us pain.

Empathy is likely mediated through mirror neurons.

Neuro-imaging studies show that empathy lights up parts of three brain areas: the Cingulate Cortex, the Insula, and the Amygdala. The Cingulate Cortex is part of the limbic system and processes emotions; the Insula help us read social cues to fathom others' mental states; and the Amygdala, also in limbic system, generates pain. These work together in the brain to answer the question: *how can I make an emotional connection with this person?*

Most of this is in the limbic system, telling us that empathy is mainly emotional. That the Amygdala gets activated tells us that empathy hurts. Fortunately, we only feel the emotional component of the pain not the physical sensation. It's as if the energy of someone's pain goes into your Amygdala and you react with empathic pain. This, I believe, contributes to burnout. So, when you WALL OFF EMPATHY, you imagine a wall to protect the Amygdala, to shield it; as a reminder to tone down the pain of empathy in your limbic system.

COMPASSION

Compassion comes to us from Latin via French. It is *feeling for and putting yourself out for others*. The etymological root of the word is "with purposeful suffering for others." My working definition is

Compassion is an act of kindness which eases others' pain.

It is motivated by altruism even if you get paid for it. You chose to be in a helping profession and altruism is usually an underlying motivator. Your work is actually ongoing altruism as you could be doing something else. We often undervalue the altruism in what we do and this can add to the burden of burnout.

Studies have found that compassion lights up parts of the Orbito-Frontal Cortex, the Ventral Tegmental Area and the Striatum. The Orbito-Frontal Cortex is where you make decisions; the Ventral Tegmental Area is concerned with motivation (and dopamine); and the Striatum, in the Basal Ganglia, helps initiate and modulate movement. These functions work together in compassion to think, decide and motivate us to action. This answers *what can I do, now, to reduce suffering?*

Empathy takes in information as is an emotional reaction; compassion is an output, it's a response, an action moving out from us to achieve something.

I speculate that compassion helps prevent burnout by closing off empathy's emotional pain and redirecting the energy to thinking and action brain pathways. As you think, decide and act, you feel more in control; more useful. That brings down stress levels. In empathy you understand and connect, but you feel less in control; in a sense you share something of the victimhood. This certainly helps to make a connection and it is important but let this only back-up the compassion of thinking and doing to achieve an outcome.

The two often work together, hand in hand. Listening, for example, is both empathic and compassionate; you understand and are helpful just by listening. All compassion needs empathy to come across as caring rather than cold or robotic.

EMPATHY VERSUS COMPASSION IN A NUTSHELL

Empathy is connecting. Compassion is being helpful and kind.

Empathy activates emotion for the sake of understanding.
Compassion activates thinking for the sake of alleviating suffering.

Empathy is an inner reaction to another's suffering.
Compassion is an outgoing response to another's suffering

Empathy can make you want to withdraw feeling wounded.
Compassion can motivate you to tend to others' wounds.

Empathy is being a great sounding-board.
Compassion is being a skilled instrument to help.

Empathy hears to understand.
Compassion helps to heal.

Empathy is walking beside someone on a difficult journey.
Compassion is carrying them if that's what it takes.

Empathy is *walking in someone else's shoes*.
Compassion is running for help when needed.

ACTIVATING COMPASSION OVER EMPATHY

It's not that compassion is all good and empathy is all bad, there is a lot of overlap and both are needed. In clinical work, aim to use compassion backed up by empathy, rather than let empathy work overtime. Empathy is always there and some people are open to more of it than others. I recommend three methods to activate more compassion over empathy help prevent burnout:

1. Understand the difference between empathy and compassion.
2. Use the WASH your WEB tool.
3. Use self-talk as a reminder.

1. UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE. It's easy to "run" when we want to and "walk" when we want to because we understand the difference so well. If we wanted to "saunter" instead of "stroll" we'd need to understand the difference and even practice to do it right. Same with empathy and compassion; it all happens in the brain. The brain pathways don't need to be understood, but the nuanced differences do.

2. USE WASH YOUR WEB. Particularly Wall off the pain of empathy and Hold Hope for the people you treat. It is also helpful to remind yourself that you are part of a system looking to get a positive result, and part of your motivation is altruism.

3. USE SELF-TALK. Self-talk is a CBT technique we've used for decades: talk to yourself in your mind to remind yourself. It's something we all do every day. Here's an example. When I'm stressed at work, I hurry down the hospital hallway rather than walk. To calm down and be efficient, I use self-talk to remind myself to walk instead. I say to myself *no need to hurry, slow down, just walk, calm down, relax*. This is self-talk, little talk-to-self reminders to activate "walk" instead of "hurry."

When I treat someone in my office and I hear painful information – about childhood abuses or war atrocities – I use self-talk to activate more compassion and less empathy. In my mind, I'll say things like *it's time to wall off empathy more; more thinking less feeling; allow more kindness out, let less pain in; you've already made a connection, it's time to help heal; I am here to be useful; more compassion, less empathy*. Sometimes, I remind myself that I am being affected by an emotion and I'll need to put this emotion on the shelf, to suppress it and deal with it later.

Sinclair, Shane, et al. "Sympathy, empathy, and compassion: A grounded theory study of palliative care patients' understandings, experiences, and preferences." *Pall. medicine*. 31.5 (2017): 437-447.

Singer, Tania, & Olga M. Klimecki. "Empathy & compassion." *Current Biology* 24.18 (2014): R875-8.

Völlm, Birgit A., et al. "Neuronal correlates of theory of mind and empathy: a functional magnetic resonance imaging study in a nonverbal task." *Neuroimage* 29.1 (2006): 90-98.

2. Suppression vs Repression

Suppression shelves it & deals with it later, repression bottles it up.

DEFENCE MECHANISMS

Suppression and repression are defence mechanisms, little techniques or “tricks” our minds do to save us from stress and make us feel better. Some are healthy, others aren't. There are dozens of defence mechanisms and several classification systems. Humour is a healthy defence mechanism, it allows you let off steam and feel better as you see the world from a lighter perspective. Displacement is less healthy. When you should be writing an essay but instead you go to the bathroom, eat a snack or check news feeds, it lets you feel less stressed but you still have work to do. Acting Out is a harmful defence mechanism. One example of acting out is getting drunk after an argument. You're wiped out so you feel less stress, but you still need to face the issues. All three of these alleviate stress, but some are healthier than others.

SUPPRESSION

Suppression is a defence mechanism. It is a good way to deal with a tough emotion when you need to get on with a day. A tough emotion feels bad, stressful, and you'd rather not feel it just then. In suppression, you are aware of the emotion but you say, *I'll shelve it. I have to work now, so I'll deal with this emotion later.* Then you do deal with it later, and it makes you feel a lot better.

Let's say you don't feel supported by your boss and your organization, but your boss is right in front of you. You feel angry but right now is not the time to express just how angry you are. So your self-talk is *I'm so angry right now, but I'll shelve this emotion, I'll deal with it later.* You may still be assertive: *you know boss, right now I'm not feeling supported* but you still don't fully express your anger. Later, when you go home, you get in touch with that anger by pounding a punching bag, talking to a supportive friend, talking to your partner, exercising to get rid of the energy of your anger, or talking to your therapist. Ideally, you think about the anger while you do these things to help work through it. Then you deal with it, release it, let it go, and feel better.

REPRESSION

Repression is also a defence mechanism, but it is very different. It is not as helpful as suppression and it can even be harmful. Repression is unconsciously pushing an emotion away so that you don't feel it. It is "bottling things up" and not dealing with it. It's not saying anything, not showing anything, maybe having a drink instead. By bottling things up, you feel better because you think you've won. *The emotion hasn't won!* It seems like the emotion has gone away, but it hasn't. It festers somewhere deep inside you. Over time, you try to get rid of the stress some other way: drinking more alcohol, doing drugs, pretending to be invincible or being cynical. In some people it comes out as physical or mental illness. I have seen this often.

Many people have repressed anger from childhood. Let's say a boy has grown into an angry young man. He thinks he's angry with the world, society and the government, but in therapy it comes out that he's actually very angry with his father who used to belt him. He and his father have never talked it through; never faced it. Instead of facing his anger, the angry young man is throwing bricks at police stations or school buildings. This makes him feel better for a short while, but he's "acting out" because he has repressed anger for many years.

SUPPRESSION VS REPRESSION

Suppression is more conscious, more here and now, more thinking, and healthier. It is useful as it helps release the strong accumulated emotions. Repression is more unconscious and it can become more of a long-term thing leading to a mass of hard-to-understand toxic feelings. In repression, emotions are not dealt with or released, they are bottled up and pushed down where they fester with other strong emotions.

Repression adds to your emotional burden,
Suppression takes away.

Repression – bottling it up and pushing it away – can lead to problem drinking, drug-taking, gambling and violence. Suppression – shelving strong emotions and actually dealing with them later – can lead to a mind free of toxic emotions. It's healthier.

SUPPRESSION IN WASH YOUR WEB

In the Wash your WEB psychological tool, suppression is used to **SHELVE STRONG EMOTIONS**. The suppression happens while you are at work. You encounter a strong emotion, you are aware of it, but you are also aware that you have a job to do and do not have time to deal with it right. So you imagine putting the strong emotion on your shelf to be dealt with later. After the shift, you deal with it.

3. Anticipation and other healthy defence mechanisms

Anticipation builds the shelf; suppression shelves the emotion.

WASH your WEB makes use of other defence mechanisms, particularly anticipation.

ANTICIPATION

Anticipation is realistic preparation for the future. It is expectation. You can anticipate good things or problems, either way, you are prepared: *forewarned is forearmed*. In other words, you are ready for whatever the world throws at you; you won't be taken by surprise. For your job, you'll be ready for possible strong emotions. Creating that space in your mind, your shelf, means increasing your capacity to deal with it.

In WASH your WEB, we first use anticipation, then suppression. They both relate to your imaginary shelf. Anticipation builds your imaginary shelf to prepare you for the strong emotions to come. Suppression is knowing you are experiencing a strong emotion at work and putting it on your shelf to deal with it later.

MATURE DEFENCE MECHANISMS

Defence mechanisms can be classified (according to Harvard Professor and Psychiatrist George Vaillant) into four levels:

- I. Pathological (irrational distortions of reality; e.g. denial)
- II. Immature (socially undesirable; acting out)
- III. Neurotic (commonly used but with annoying consequences; repression)
- IV. Mature (healthy and even virtuous; suppression)

Mature defence mechanisms are the healthiest. One way to remember them is *Use these to get a "triple A" SASH*. SAAASH is an acronym:

Suppression
Anticipation
Altruism
Asceticism
Sublimation
Humour

Suppression and Anticipation are used in the WASH your WEB tool to Anticipate strong emotions and Shelve strong emotions. Altruism, being of constructive service, is inherent in your job. This needs to be acknowledged and valued. Altruism is also found in the kindness of compassion and in the understanding of empathy.

Asceticism the word comes from the Greek word for training and exercise. These involve effort and repeated practice. You have skills which you learnt and trained. This training took time, effort and practice. The WASH your WEB tool, too, is a small training exercise to develop a useful skill: to prevent burnout by working through accumulated emotions. By using the mature defence mechanism of asceticism, you decrease stress by becoming better at something. The stress of an exam is much less when you have studied or practiced what you needed to practice. Used this way, asceticism is healthy and helps alleviate stress.

Sublimation is changing stressful emotions into something healthy; changing the unacceptable into something acceptable. In stead of hitting someone you hate, take your anger on a punching bag, in the gym, on a telephone book, or while jogging, swimming or playing a sport. This is a healthy defence mechanism. It is preferable and useful for people who used to drink too much, shout, use violence, or be cynical, sarcastic and caustic. (These can be signs of repressed anger).

Humour, too, is healthy. I encourage its use for all people in helping industries, in fact, for all people. Humour does several things. It helps you stand outside your situation so that you can see the big picture, the forest and the trees. It unites your thinking and feeling to open up brain pathways of understanding. It puts things into perspective. It is an emotional release and feels great.

The WASH your WEB tool encourages humour as part of your after-shift routine. Go ahead. Have a laugh; with a friend or alone. Let it out. Look at the trending memes showing how stupid a really serious situation is. No matter how twisted or demoralized life may become, it will always give us something worth laughing at. As George Vaillant says, even black humour can “transform terror into relaxation.”

Vaillant, George E. "Involuntary coping mechanisms: a psychodynamic perspective." *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience* 13.3 (2011): 366.

4. The principles of Exposure Therapy

There are two steps to overcoming any fear: understand it and face it.

Exposure Therapy treats people for anxiety by exposing them to the very thing they fear. It has been used for many decades for a wide range of anxiety conditions including specific phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

WASH your WEB employs some exposure therapy principles to help prevent burnout and vicarious trauma. It's for people who are generally well and haven't been diagnosed with PTSD or anxiety, or have underlying abuse or trauma issues. It's for people who, because of the work they do, find themselves under stress.

The main principle of Exposure Therapy is that if you confront your fears rather than avoid them, anxiety will decrease. Long before formalized Exposure Therapy, we told people to

Get back on the horse after falling off (and before fear sets in),

Get back into the game after you've taken a hit (and before you give up),

Get back in the water after you've swallowed water (before you give up swimming).

To *get back into the saddle, the field or the pool* like this takes a bit of courage at first, but very soon that feeling of proficiency returns; you're back in charge. This is common sense and good advice, and makes use of the exposure therapy principle.

It is usual for people to avoid what they fear. They avoid reminders of trauma, conversations about it, or the places where trauma happened. Avoiding these things, however, only reinforces the fear. It lets the brain think it's right to be anxious. Confronting it straight after, or soon after-shift, helps diminish the anxiety or stress.

Formal Exposure Therapy is done by directly facing the fear (getting back on the horse that threw you or going to the corner where that accident happened), by looking at pictures or computer-generated images of the trauma, or through imagination. Exposure is usually done gradually (graded exposure). Usually, formal Exposure Therapy is done in with a therapist. Here, we're not doing formal therapy, we are using a principle to help prevent burnout. Still, it is best to take time out after a shift and to "support" yourself; be gentle with yourself.

The WASH your WEB tool uses several important sub-principles of formal Exposure Therapy:

1. Graded exposure
2. Imaginal exposure
3. Desensitization.

1. GRADED EXPOSURE. By starting your after-shift WEB with Walk through your day, you prepare your mind for the next step, the expressing of shelved strong emotions. This follows the principle of graded (gradual) exposure. Ease into it. The Notice – Label – Express format of Express each shelve emotion also follows the principle of graded exposure.

2. IMAGINAL EXPOSURE. The WEB's Walking through your day and Expressing each strong emotion, are two steps which are both done in your mind. They are imaginal; it happens in your imagination. The advantage is that you stay in control. You can decide how much detail of the event recall in your mind. You control the amount of exposure. This is actually not very confronting, it is easy enough to do, as you probably do this yourself in your mind anyway. Some people do this over and over and over. This is not helpful, it becomes helpful when we consciously think about the emotion while feeling it. This helps lead to desensitization.

3. DESENSITIZATION. Ideally, you relaxed while Expressing each shelved emotion with words, vocalizations and gestures. The Bilateral Stimulation Technique (BST) also helps keep you relaxed. This creates a strong association in your brain that says *I can be relaxed and in control while feeling this emotion*. Through this, the brain learns it has nothing to fear. It feels the emotion and, at the same time, thinks about the emotion. The brain feels in control of the emotion rather than being controlled by it. This helps overcome fear. It is empowering.

It is important to control how much of the emotion you express rather than allowing yourself to be overwhelmed in an uncontrollable flood of tears or in anger or hurt. Words, a few tears or a fist clenched in anger is OK to express the emotion, but keep your thoughts describing the emotion. Notice the emotion. Remain in control. Feel empowered. Notice – Label – Express helps the mind understand the emotion rationally and then file the emotion away.

Often, we go over events of the day in our minds anyway. We complain that certain things happened, but this doesn't necessarily work through the event. It can remain stuck. Notice – Label – Express breaks the cycle by linking thinking and feeling. With the principles of exposure therapy think about feeling purposefully, open new brain pathways, and help file the experience away.

The principles of Exposure Therapy work in several ways. They help your brain

Associate strong emotions with relaxed feelings for a sense of control;

Gain a sense of proficiency of knowing you can manage your emotions;

See emotions as part of the compassionate service you are rendering,

realize that a memory is just a memory and an image is just an image and that they cannot really hurt you;

File emotions away through Notice – Label – Express for understanding.

As a medical student, one of the most memorable and useful lectures I ever attended was on overcoming *any* anxiety or fear. Be it fear of exams, of people, of making a fool of yourself, of work stress, whatever, there are two steps in overcoming it:

1. Know and understand the fear
2. Face it (gently).

This principle has been the basis of so much work I have done with the people I treat who have suffered the ravages of PTSD. The WASH your WEB tool is designed to help prevent something like PTSD or burnout happening in the first place.

Rothbaum, Barbara Olasov, and Ann C. Schwartz. "Exposure therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder." *American journal of psychotherapy* 56.1 (2002): 59-75.