

SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM  
SYMPATHY → EMPATHY → COMPASSION

**Sympathy** is *feeling sorry for people*. Though well intentioned, it can come off as detached, ceremonial and polite rather than sincere. It is often experienced as impersonal, cordial and cool. Brene' Brown would say that sympathy drives disconnection because the speaker does not feel in synch with the listener.

**Empathy** is *feeling with people*. Brene' Brown calls empathy a "courageous choice" because in order to relate empathically to another person you have to locate something in yourself that evokes similar feelings (even if from a very different experience). Empathy leads to a sense of connection between the listener and the speaker, which is what can alleviate distress in the speaker.

**Empathic distress.** Empathy is based on a hard-wired reaction called *mirroring*. When we witness distress in others we often experience that distress ourselves. This is the basis of *bystander trauma* and *bystander joy*. When we witness someone being traumatized, we experience the same neurological and physical symptoms of that person. When we witness someone performing an act of kindness, we also experience the neurological and physical reactions to that kindness. As writer Amanda Hess has said, "When we reach out to one another, we're often just feeling ourselves." (*New York Times Magazine*, "Touching Base," Amanda Hess, December 4, 2016).

If caretakers do not shift from *empathy* to *compassion*, they risk experiencing *empathic distress*, which can lead to burn out, caretaker stress, negativity and poor health. Empathic distress activates the *neural pain network* in caretakers.

**Compassion** is rooted in empathy but then *shifts* into altruistic caring. Yale psychologist Paul Bloom (*Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, Harper Collins, 2016) calls this *rational compassion*—a conscious shift to a caring but somewhat more detached stance based on thinking of what the other person needs from the caretaker.

When caretakers shift from empathy to compassion they actually experience all the neurological and physical benefits of joy and gratitude. (We actually see an increase in a rare 40 cps gamma ray in the brain under these circumstances. This frequency of gamma ray is experienced in humans only very briefly—about a second at a time. Those frequencies are associated with the joy of living).

### Shifting from Empathy to Compassion

- 1) Be aware of the distinction between empathy and compassion.
- 2) Acknowledge the other person's emotional tone and *experience*.
- 3) Identify what you are experiencing in response to the other person.
- 4) Affirm to yourself: "He/she is over there. I am over here. I am not having their experience."
- 5) "What does this person need from me right now?" Take a neutral emotional pose.

Practicing compassion leads to resilience, gratitude, glow and good health rather than stress and burnout.