

## The Surprising Effects of Compassion

The Dalai Lama once commented that psychologists spend too much time studying misbehavior and not enough time studying good behavior. In a recent experiment on compassion Pendleton native son Paul Condon and colleague David DeSteno of Northeastern University have gone some distance in following the Dalai Lama's suggestion, with surprising results.

Forty-four college students participated in the research, which was advertised as a study of mathematical ability and perception. The participants were paid for each of 20 math problems solved within a certain amount of time. Each actual subject was seated between a male and female "student" who were really accomplices of the experimenters. All three solved problems on a computer screen in the same room, then an experimenter entered and was supposed to check each person's work, shred their sheets of problems, and pay them cash. However, after checking and paying the female "student" and the real participant, the experimenter said he was out of cash and left the room to get some more money before checking the third "student's" work. While the experimenter was out of the room the "student" shredded his paper in front of the other two students. When the experimenter returned the "student" told him that he got all 20 problems correct and had already shredded his work. The experimenter, after some hesitation, paid the "student" the full amount for his work, and the entire exchange was witnessed by the real participant and the female "student."

The next part of the study involved a visual discrimination test, also administered on the computer, which actually served no purpose other than to convince the real participants that the experiment was about perception. However, once it was over half of the participants witnessed the female "student" become emotional, start crying (with help from eye drops she had slipped into her eyes), and telling the experimenter that she had just learned recently that her brother had cancer and that it was really bothering her "right now." The experimenter then allowed the female "student" to leave without finishing the experiment. The other half of the participants witnessed the female "student" merely saying she was late for a doctor's appointment and then being allowed to leave.

The final phase of the experiment involved participants mixing various sauces for a "taste discrimination" test they would administer to each other. The condiments included jars of "hot sauce" as well as less spicy items such as chocolate and jam. The participants were also allowed to view a questionnaire supposedly completed by the male "student" indicating a strong dislike for spicy food. The amount of hot sauce the participants put in the "taste test" for the male student was measured and recorded.

Finally, all participants completed a questionnaire about their emotional state during the experiment, which included a measure of compassion, before leaving the study.

**Results.** As you might expect, and consistent with other research showing that people generally dislike cheaters, most participants added a lot of hot sauce to the "taste test" for the male "student" who appeared to be cheating on his math problems – that is, unless

they also witnessed the other “student” crying. Participants who had observed the “crying student” did not add more hot sauce. They also reported feelings of compassion on their follow-up questionnaires that the other participants did not report.

What would you conclude from this study? Condon and DeSteno suggest that feeling compassion for one person “radiates” even to persons whose actions we would otherwise want to punish. Compassion thus is a surprisingly powerful emotion. One wonders how long such radiation lasts. We know from other recent research (see other What’s New articles) that people are subtly affected emotionally and behaviorally by all sorts of prompts around them, from cluttered subways to fast food signs, but how long do these effects last? In this experiment the compassion felt for a grieving student lasted long enough for the participants to keep from punishing the “cheater” student as severely as they otherwise would. I wonder what the Dalai Lama would say about that.

Condon, P. & DeSteno, D. 2010. Compassion for one reduces punishment for another. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 47, Pages 698-701.