

BOOK REVIEWS

Choose Compassion: Why It Matters and How It Works (2022) by James Kirby. University of Queensland Press. ISBN: 9780702265648

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One of Australia's leading compassion researchers, Dr. James Kirby employs science and real-world cases to argue that compassion is the most important human motivation to harness in today's world. Citing the benefits of compassion training exercises for life struggles including self-criticism, shame, grief, parenting, depression, and anxiety, Kirby draws on findings from the University of Queensland's Compassionate Mind Research Group, of which he is co-director. Debunking the myth that compassion is a soft or weak emotion, he examines fears, blocks, and resistances we and our clients may have to compassion, which he defines as the courageous and wise motivation to turn towards suffering and try to alleviate it. Reviewer Prof. Paul Gilbert, who developed compassion focused therapy, applauds how *Choose Compassion: Why it matters and how it works* (Kirby, 2022) takes on big themes, such as the inevitability of suffering and loss, and makes them understandable and accessible to readers. Despite climate change, mass extinctions, genocide, wars, and the capacity of humans to be callous and contradictory, Kirby's message is ultimately one of hope.

Choose Compassion: Why it matters and how it works (Kirby, 2022) has been written by one of the world's leading compassion researchers and theorists, Dr. James Kirby. As Kirby says at the beginning of the book, there is a lot of confusion about what and how we think about compassion. Although compassion has been identified as one of the most important human motives for over 3,000 years, it has only been in the last few decades that scientists have started to explore it in detail. This was partly kickstarted when the Dalai Lama invited neuroscientists to explore what happens in the brain when we are mindful and compassionate: quite a lot, it turns out! The Internet is awash with podcasts and videos championing the virtues of compassion but not always as wisely as in this book. Some definitions imply that compassion is about kindness, forgiveness, or even love. While these can be ways of *being* compassionate they are not compassion itself. We do not need to love people

^a The founder of compassion focused therapy (CFT), Prof. Paul Gilbert (PhD, FBPsS, OBE) has researched evolutionary approaches to mental health difficulties with a special focus on mood, shame, and self-criticism. He was made professor of clinical psychology at the University of Derby, United Kingdom, in 1992, where he established and is the director of the Centre for Compassion Research and Training. He is also an honorary visiting professor at the University of Queensland. Until his retirement from the United Kingdom's National Health Service in 2016, he was a consultant clinical psychologist for over 40 years. In 2006, he established the Compassionate Mind Foundation as an international charity to promote wellbeing through the scientific understanding and application of compassion (www.compassionatemind.co.uk). There are now several sister foundations in other countries, including Compassionate Mind Australia (www.compassionatemind.org.au). Prof. Gilbert has written/edited 23 books and over 300 papers and book chapters. *Compassion Focused Therapy: Clinical Practice and Applications* (Gilbert & Simos, 2022) offers a detailed overview of CFT.

to be compassionate to them. Compassion is basically a motivation for benevolence, to try as best we can to help those who suffer and not to be a cause of it ourselves.

Our journey into compassion here is in the hands of one who has studied it for many years. This enables Kirby to clarify the scientific approach to compassion. He gently yet masterfully helps readers recognise that compassion is the opposite of weakness or softness because in reality compassion can be an extraordinarily wise and courageous orientation to the world we live in. For example, a firefighter or someone standing up for injustice needs immense courage and wisdom. Moreover, we need compassion because all of us are in a world of suffering. We arrived here without our permission. We experience ourselves as having bodies and minds that we never chose, and that will decay and die in a way that we never chose. We can (and often do) live in denial of the realities of the suffering inherent in biological life and in that way block ourselves off from the need for compassion—until these realities knock on our door. In addition, as the contemplative traditions have highlighted for thousands of years, nothing is permanent. Everything changes. This in itself indicates that losses are part of life, which is also a source of suffering; we and everybody we love will die, and the achievements we value so much today will gradually fade. The contemplative traditions for compassion arose from facing these realities head on. This is why these traditions choose to practise and develop compassion.

These are big themes to take on and make easily understandable and accessible but this book succeeds admirably. To begin with understanding what compassion is, it poses very important subtle questions: if you were being compassionate, what would an observer see in you to decide it was compassion they were seeing? If you wanted or needed somebody to be compassionate to you, how would you like them to think, feel, and behave towards you? Indeed, inviting people to think about these questions is important in compassionate mind training.

The book then moves to a definition of compassion, which is to see compassion as an algorithm. This is important because algorithms are basically ways in which the body and the brain interact with the world. For example, if the temperature in your room decreases enough you will start to shiver but if the temperature increases you will start to perspire. You don't control this; it is an automatic process of *if A then* do B. What your body needs is a signal detector for temperature linked to abilities to change physiological systems. A lot of our basic behaviours are linked to algorithms. Consider threat. First, we need detectors to detect threat and then the algorithm will be *if* threat appears *then* stimulate your anxiety systems and take avoiding action. On the other hand, if the stimulus is somebody you fancy then you probably do not want to stimulate those brain systems that entice you into fight or flight but ones that are going to help you engage in appropriate behaviour. And if you hear your baby crying, this signal will stimulate systems in your brain that will make you want to find out what's happening and soothe your baby. *If A then* do B. Thus

we can think about how the brain evolved an algorithm that would enable us to be able to detect and be sensitive to signals of suffering or need and stimulate body and brain systems to help us work out what to do. For all the fluffy ideas around compassion, that is its basic process. It is an algorithm that is designed with detectors for distress, suffering, and need which stimulates desires to do something about it.

What science has taught us is that the brain systems used for being sensitive and attending to suffering are different from the ones we use for thinking through planning what to do and taking action. This book highlights this in that both sensitivity and the actions we take need to be based on wisdom. Courage without wisdom can be reckless and wisdom without courage can be ineffective. This book also discusses how there are processes sometimes conflated with compassion such as kindness, empathy, and so forth. This matters because if you are going to choose compassion as a way of living it is very important to know what you are choosing, why you are choosing it, and how to cultivate the skills of compassion.

Other key issues addressed include how it can be very easy for humans to be callous. This is when we are insensitive to suffering and lack commitment to do anything about it. Worse still, we can sometimes become cruel when harming others and causing suffering is the whole point of our actions. Tragically, humans are very good at both callousness and cruelty as evidenced in the history of wars, slavery, torture, treatment of women and other marginalised groups, and other oppressive practices. This book calls these the *dark side*. While compassion can of course support happiness and personal meaning, a crucial effect and need for compassion is to address the causes of suffering which tragically are often ourselves. A central reason to understand and then choose compassion as a way of living and thinking is therefore to help us stand against the *dark side in ourselves* and try to find ways to prevent it from manifesting in others. Indeed, Kirby has been at the forefront of exploring areas where individuals can be fearful or resistant to being compassionate. If we are to choose compassion then, as he skilfully weaves into this book, we need to know what we want compassion to do for us and the world we live in.

One of the main reasons that we may not choose compassion is because self-interest overrides concern to take action. Kirby has again been at the vanguard of relevant research and has explored this issue with children. He was one of the first to show that while young children will often help, when helping involves loss they tend not to help, even when not helping seems distressing. He discusses this in chapter 8—the Anatomy of Suffering. In some ways this is one of the biggest problems in the world today. Outside of family and friends we may only help others if it does not cost us too much. It is not that we are not aware or sensitive to suffering but that we do not choose compassionate actions. Sometimes it is because it is perceived as too costly in terms of personal time or resources. There are many ways in which we are callous to suffering. Consider World War II when Jewish people were hounded and slaughtered in their millions; even though people were aware of what was happening, few did

little to stop it. This is a problem when we see our group members behaving immorally and yet we either applaud them or do not stop them. If we choose compassion then we choose to not turn the blind eye. Kirby explores this in chapter 3 and in his research on moral expansiveness which refers to the “size” of our moral circles—that is, to what extent we view other entities (e.g., in-groups, out-groups, animals, the environment) worthy of our moral concern. Even more important than empathy or mindfulness, compassion has been found to be crucial at predicting moral expansiveness. A practice implication for therapists, and for anyone interested in mental health, is that compassion training interventions can increase our moral circles.

For a book with the title *Choose Compassion*, it is important to understand how compassion works, its facilitators, and the enormous benefits of compassion for the human brain and body, not to mention prosocial relationships. However, it is also central to understand why we do not choose compassion or what inhibits compassion. Kirby cleverly weaves these two themes of compassion facilitators and inhibitors all the way through this book. The early chapters take us into careful analysis about what compassion is and how it is different to other processes. They indicate clearly how and why humans are different to other animals because we have a range of complicated cognitive competencies that have been evolving over the last 2 million years. These cognitive competencies are game changers which can be used for helpful or unhelpful ends. We can use reasoning and problem solving in a way that no other animal can because of how we perceive and have insight into the nature of the world. This is what allows us to solve complex problems like the causes of a virus and how to create a vaccine. In the hundreds of millions of years of life on earth no other species was able to do anything remotely like this. Humans also have competencies that far exceed other animals when it comes to empathising, and for being aware and mindful; able to observe our minds and recognise what can be helpful and what can be harmful. The importance of these competencies is expertly elucidated throughout the book. What emerges is deep insight into the nature of compassion and how and why we can train our minds to become more compassionate.

In terms of style, *Choose Compassion* is wonderfully accessible and ripples with fascinating cases, reflections, and personal stories, all of which help us to understand how and why compassion is the most important of all our motives to harness in today’s world.



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