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## BONDS

# Find Compassion for Difficult People

Avoid the anxiety of interacting by adjusting your thoughts before an encounter



ILLUSTRATION: GREG CLARKE



By

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It takes compassion to deal with the difficult people in your life.

New research suggests the answer to avoiding the anxiety, high blood pressure and disappointment of interacting with a person that rubs you the wrong way lies in preparation. You can adjust your thinking about the person before an encounter and learn to feel compassion for him or her.

Researchers say compassion has four components: You recognize another person's suffering, are emotionally moved by it, wish the other person did not suffer and feel motivated to help relieve the suffering. Whether you actually help or not is up to you. It is enough to be willing to do so, the researchers say.

The new study, conducted by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, Stanford University and the University of California, Davis and published online last month in the journal "Mindfulness," looked at the efficacy of Stanford's Compassion Cultivation Training Program (CCT), which is an eight-week course that teaches people how to become more compassionate. Researchers tracked 51 adults in the course through an iPhone app that prompted them to rate their levels of four different emotional states—*anxiety, calm, fatigue and alertness*—twice a day. Participants were also asked if they felt they could successfully regulate these emotions and how they would do that. (Did they try to reduce the emotion, maintain it, increase it or ignore it?) They answered weekly surveys as well.

Over the time period of the class, people were able to regulate and improve negative states, such as *anxiety and stress*, and increase positive states, such as *calm*, by cultivating compassion, both for themselves and others.

Anyone can take Stanford's CCT course, which was created in 2009 by Thupten Jinpa, the Dalai Lama's chief English translator, and a group of neuroscientists, psychologists and therapists and aims to teach people compassion toward all, including the difficult

people in their lives. It is taught through the university's medical school and by more than 100 certified teachers around the world.

The program, which includes training on meditation and how to adjust one's thoughts, takes people through a number of steps that get more difficult as the program goes on. Some of the steps are about learning to focus, practicing compassion toward yourself and a loved one, and developing an appreciation for people outside your inner circle, including difficult people. Exercises include reflecting on how the difficult person in your life is someone's son or daughter, mother or father, sister or brother—just as you are—and has hopes and dreams and sorrows of his or her own.

The program doesn't advocate that people forgive someone who has been hurtful or continue a relationship with that person. Rather, it suggests we can feel compassion for that person—recognize that he or she suffers and wish for an end to that suffering—as a way to help ourselves.

"There are consequences to ourselves in terms of negative emotions when we are walking around thinking bad thoughts about someone or trying to avoid him; this allows us to let them go," says Hooria Jazaieri, a researcher at Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, who teaches the compassion class at Stanford and is the lead author on the new study.

Here are tips for using some of the Stanford program's teachings at home:

**Don't suppress your thoughts.** Research shows that suppression activates the amygdala in your brain, where your body's fight-or-flight response resides. Suppressing will make you more anxious in the long-run and will have harmful effects on your physical health. It will also make you think more about the person you might be trying to stop focusing on. In one classic study in which participants were told not to think about a white bear, the bear took over their thoughts. If your difficult person's name or a memory arises, try to pay attention briefly then let your thoughts drift on to something else.

**Acknowledge that you can be difficult, too.** Ms. Jazaieri calls this the "just like me" rule—remember that just as this person is difficult for you, you might be difficult for someone else. "Maybe I have not done as many bad things," Ms. Jazaieri

says. "But I have said things that aren't true or have hurt people and it is humbling to remember that."

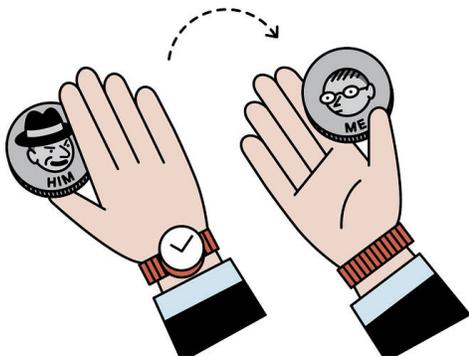


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**Be curious.** For a moment, imagine what life might be like for this other person. Remember that he or she also has hopes and dreams. He is a father or son. She is a mother or daughter. By tapping into their struggles, you will be able to let go of some of your

anxiety or anger, and this will have positive mental and physical effects for you. Again, Ms. Jazaieri says you don't have to forgive the person. The goal is to decrease the emotional reactivity that only harms you.

**Tune into your body.** Notice any physiological changes you experience when you think about or talk to your difficult person—shallow breath, tight shoulders, sweaty palms—and see if you can make adjustments. Take a deep breath and relax your muscles. This will change the way you react.

**Practice, practice, practice.** It is easy to have good thoughts about a stranger or acquaintance. But, can you have them toward someone who pushes all your buttons? If



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you can, you've reached a higher level of emotional resiliency. And remember that this is supposed to be hard.

“Think of yourself as an athlete,” says Ms. Jazaieri. You want to practice when it is not game time. So when it is game time and you are around this person, you can call upon these skills.”

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