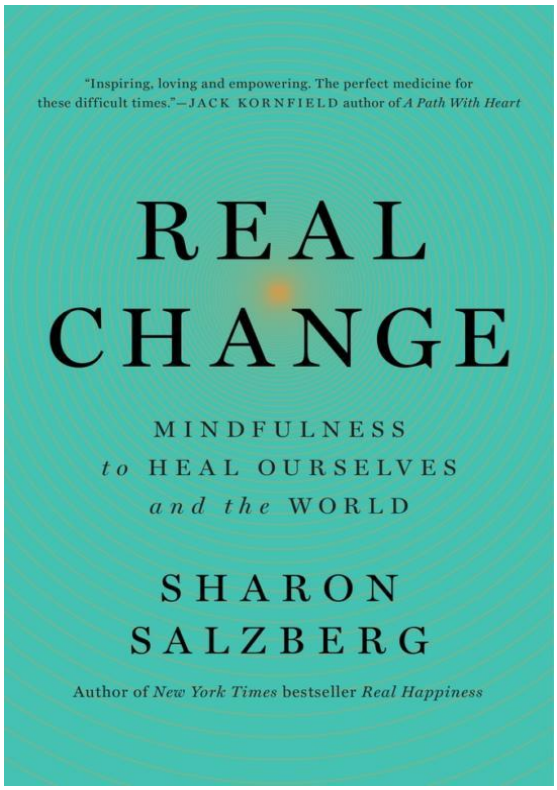
Contemplative Resilience Tools for Social Change Makers

Participant Course Journal: Week 4

Moving from Empathy to Compassion



Drawing from elements of the Garrison Institute's Contemplative-Based Resilience (CBR) Project and from Sharon Salzberg's book, *Real Change: Mindfulness to Heal Ourselves and the World*, this course invites you to strengthen your resilience and deepen awareness, balance and connection in your work and lives.

"Be Well, Serve Well"

GARRISON INSTITUTE | CBR PROJECT

Garrison Institute

Founded in 2003, the Garrison Institute is a 501(c)3, not-for-profit, non-sectarian organization exploring the intersection of contemplation and engaged action in the world. The mission of the Garrison Institute is to apply the transformative power of contemplation to today's pressing social and environmental concerns, helping build a more compassionate, resilient future. The Contemplative-Based Resilience (CBR) Project is one of the Garrison Institute's signature initiatives, addressing the psychological and embodied dimensions of resilience for professional service providers.

Real Change

In her eleventh book, *Real Change: Mindfulness to Heal Ourselves & the World*, Sharon Salzberg teaches us that meditation is not a replacement for taking action, but rather a way to practice generosity with ourselves and summon the courage to break through boundaries, reconnect to a movement that's bigger than ourselves, and have the energy to stay active.

Consulting with veteran activists and social change agents in a variety of fields, Sharon collects and shares their wisdom and offers the best practical advice to foster transformation in both ourselves and in society. Real Change guides us to embody the fundamental principles of mindfulness practice toward greater clarity and confidence, so that we can create a better world.

Use of the Participant Course Journal

This *Participant Course Journal* is designed as a companion to this course. You are encouraged to have this *Journal* accessible during each workshop and cohort coaching session. Included in the pages of this *Course Journal* are: Weekly Topic Descriptions, Presentation Slides, Social Learning and Personal Reflection Prompts, Practice Resources, and space for notes.

This *Journal* has been set up as a fillable PDF document, so that you may either type notes directly into the *Journal* through Adobe (remember to save your work) or you may print it and handwrite notes throughout.

Contact

Please direct any questions to the Contemplative-Based Resilience Project team at the Garrison Institute at CBRProject@garrisoninstitute.org.

Table of Contents for Week 4

Week 4: Moving from Empathy to Compassion

Even though we use these two terms synonymously in conversational English, researchers and psychologists actually draw some distinctions between the two. Empathy is the resonance we feel in witnessing someone's struggle or distress. Compassion – moving toward the suffering to see if we can be of help --is one possible response to the felt sense of empathy. Alternative responses to empathy might include: being so exhausted we just want to go to bed, or moving right into the suffering to burn up ourselves.

Empathy vs. Compassion

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND NEUROLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Neuroscientific research demonstrates that empathy and compassion differ both on a **psychological** and a **neurological** level[1]. In participants exposed to images of suffering, empathy and compassion activate different, **non-overlapping areas of the brain** and create very contrasting emotional responses:

- **EMPATHY**: activation increased in brain areas stimulated when vicariously experiencing pain[2], as well as reported **increase in negative feelings.** The fMRI scans showed that empathizing with another person's feelings leads to the activation of neural networks that also support the **first-person experience of these feelings** (positive and negative ones).

- **COMPASSION**: Activation increased in brain regions responsible for experiencing pleasant sensations and social rewards.[3] Subjects reported a decrease of negative feelings and an increase of positive ones. Reactions are based on positive, other-oriented feelings and the activation of prosocial motivation and behavior.

The results show clearly that despite frequent confusion of the two terms they mean two distinct mental states.

[1] T. Singer, O.Klimecki research study on empathy and compassion, Current Biology, Volume 24, Issue 18, pR875–R878, 22 September 2014 http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054

[2] *Insula* and *anterior middle cingulate cortex*

[3] *Spanning medial orbitofrontal cortex* and *ventral striatum*

In empathy we feel the pain or the negative feelings as our own. That explains why empathizing with suffering others for longer period of time causes withdrawal and rejection and when experienced chronically, it can give rise to negative health outcomes (fatigue, burnout, secondary or vicarious trauma).

Compassion strengthens resilience and eliminates the negative impact of the interactions with the suffering of others.

EMPATHY	COMPASSION
▪ from Greek *em* (in) *pathos* (feeling) ▪ **Passive attitude, often unconscious - *feel with*** physical reactions that activate feelings, general capacity to resonate with others' emotional states, gives us capacity to experience what others experience, relate to those in our care, and put their experience into perspective. ▪ "Understanding a person from his or her frame of reference rather than one's own, so that one **vicariously experiences the person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts.**"[4] ▪ "Walking in another person's shoes" (C.Rogers) ▪ **Empathy** is our gut feeling that alerts us to the needs of others and draws us to respond. It can advise us who can be trusted and who should be feared. ▪ There is cognitive (mental) empathy "I can understand what you feel because I can imagine it" and emotional empathy "I understand what you feel... because I feel what you are feeling." ▪ When connecting to painful experiences of others, it may lead to **empathic distress**: aversive response (we take the pain as our own), accompanied by desire to withdraw from the situation (to protect ourselves from excessive negative feeling) ▪ Self-preservative motivation and withdrawal/avoidant attitude	▪ from Latin *com patere* (suffer with) ▪ **Active attitude - *feel for*** ▪ Feeling of concern for another person's suffering with motivation to help. ▪ The ingredients of compassion are **empathy** (connecting with another person's feeling), **sympathy** (recognition and awareness of another's suffering), **kindness** (altruistic love), **generosity** and **acceptance**. - Connecting with **our shared humanity -** we relate to our own experience of similar emotions and the universal human suffering, but it does not mean that we share the suffering of others as our own - **Engagement**: active attitude, stimulates important motives for action and desire for ourselves and others to be free of suffering, motivation to improve the other´s well-being - **Intention** for **alleviation and prevention of suffering,** strong motivation to improve the other's well-being (screening for the roots of suffering) and anticipated relief and joy for when the source of suffering would be removed - Element of **altruistic love**, feeling of warmth, concern and care for the others (compassion and love: two sides of the same coin). ▪ Prosocial motivation and approaching attitude

[4] after APA College Dictionary of Psychology. 2009. American Psychological Association

Compassion

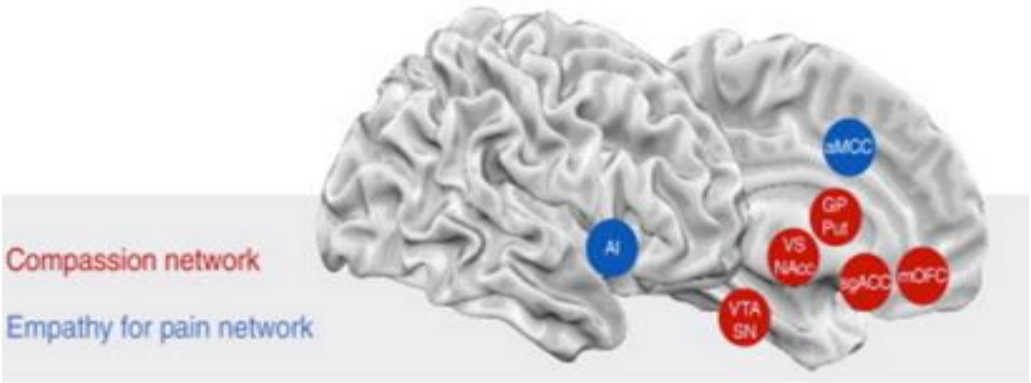
Compassion is a key way to facilitate connection. Contemplative practices emphasize that compassion can be learned, and neuroscience shows that the brain has neuroplasticity. Techniques such as compassion meditation and loving-kindness are ways to train ourselves to be more compassionate. Research demonstrates that **compassion training** can:

- **Reverse the negative effect of empathic distress due to exposure to the suffering of others**
- **Increase positive feelings and resilience** (activations in a neural network usually related to positive emotions)
- **Promote prosocial behavior and a sense of connection with others**
- Strengthen **better coping behaviors in stressful situations**

Compassion is an intention, which can be sustained and repeated indefinitely. In this way, compassion cannot be worn out. It also gives strong sense of agency to the practitioner: through compassion they can do something.

Compassion helps to strengthen **positive feelings** and a **sense of connection**. It helps cultivate positive mental states that strengthen relevant neural networks that prove effective when we face adversities and witness suffering.

"Neurons that fire together, wire together"



Notes

Presentation Slides

Week 4 – Moving from Empathy to Compassion

- Building Community & Intention Setting
- Teaching: Empathy and Compassion
- Meditation Practice
- Question & Response
- Social Learning: Sharon Salzberg in conversation with Ellen Agler
- Mindful Movement Practice
- Silent Personal Reflection
- Closing

"Compassion implies boundaries (movement toward, not into); balance (compassion for all, including ourselves); stability rather than shakiness; and clarity rather than over-identification.

Compassion can be cultivated, through practice, and as it develops further, it helps us avoid burnout and fatigue..."

~ Sharon Salzberg, *Real Change*

Empathy

Empathy is understanding a person from their frame of reference rather than one's own, so that one vicariously experiences the person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts.

This ability to **mirror** the emotions of others, both positive and negative, by 'feeling with' enables us to connect.

Awareness is key to buffering emotional contagion.

Compassion

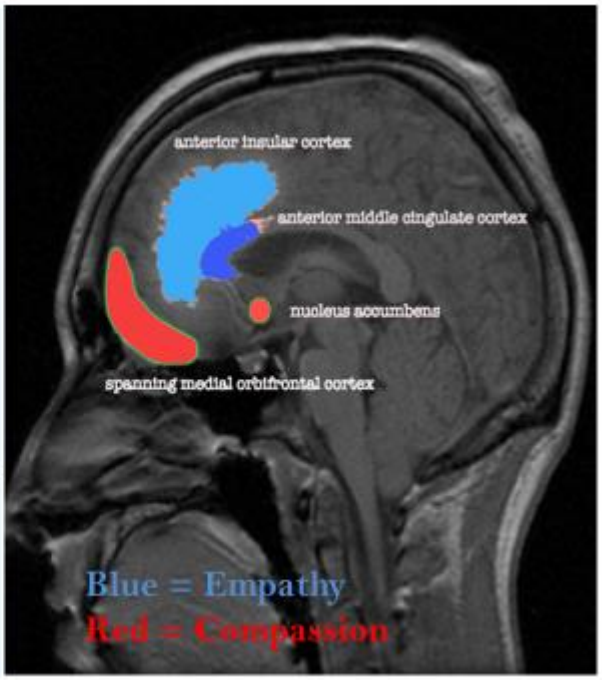
Compassion is the concern for others' suffering with the motivation to help in our shared humanity to alleviate the suffering. However, we do not share the suffering of others as our own.

Compassion practices, such as loving-kindness foster **resilience**, strengthen immune response, and improve **wellbeing**.

Distinctions

1. Empathy
   - Anterior insula and cingulate cortex are strongly activated
   - Negative feeling: e.g. stress and pain
   - Poor health and burnout
   - Withdraw and non-social behavior
   - Empathy fatigue

2. Compassion
   - Medial orbitofrontal cortex and nucleus accumbens strongly activated
   - Positive feelings: e.g. altruistic love
   - Good health and wellbeing
   - Approach and pro-social behavior
   - Connection & Resilience



Self Compassion

Compassion starts with self.
How do we relate to ourselves?

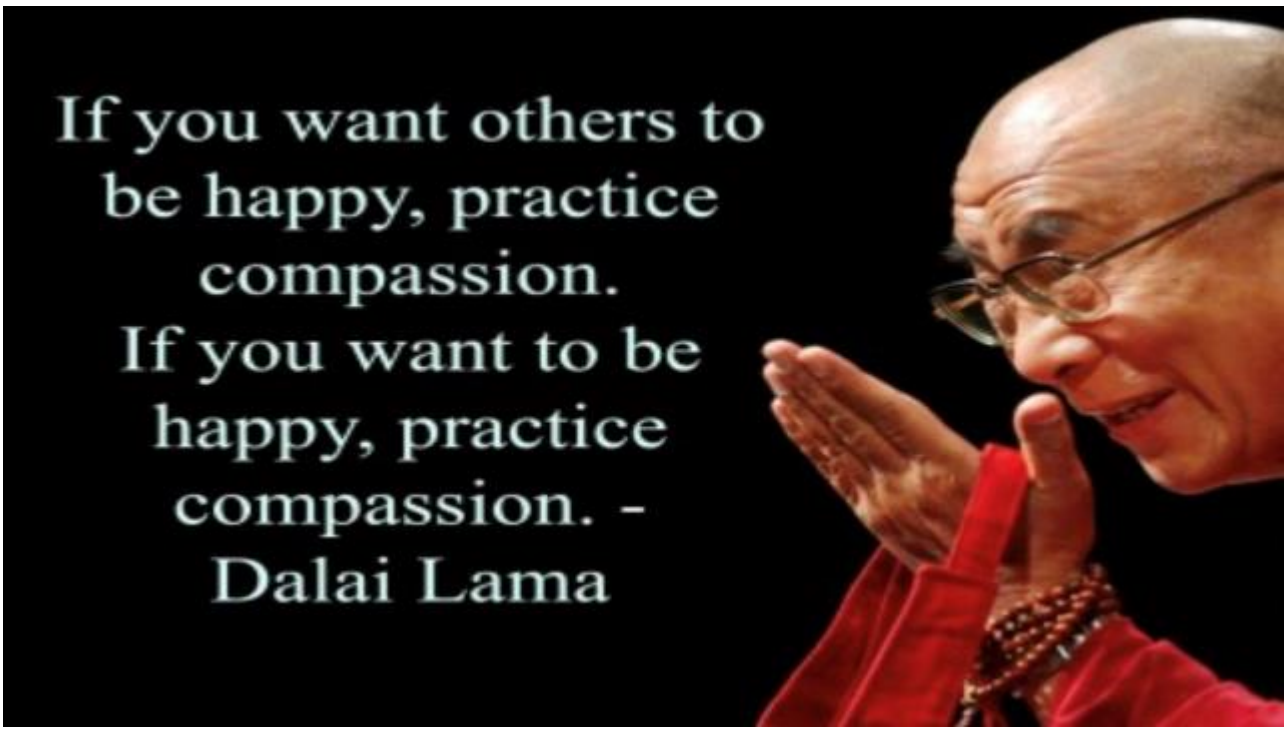
1. Self-Kindness versus Self-Judgment

2. Shared Humanity versus Isolation

3. Mindfulness versus Over Identification

~ Kristen Neff

Becoming more compassionate doesn't just benefit others.
It can actually make us happier.



Notes

Meditation

Notes

Social Learning

Sharon Salzberg & Ellen Agler

"Just to the next best thing."

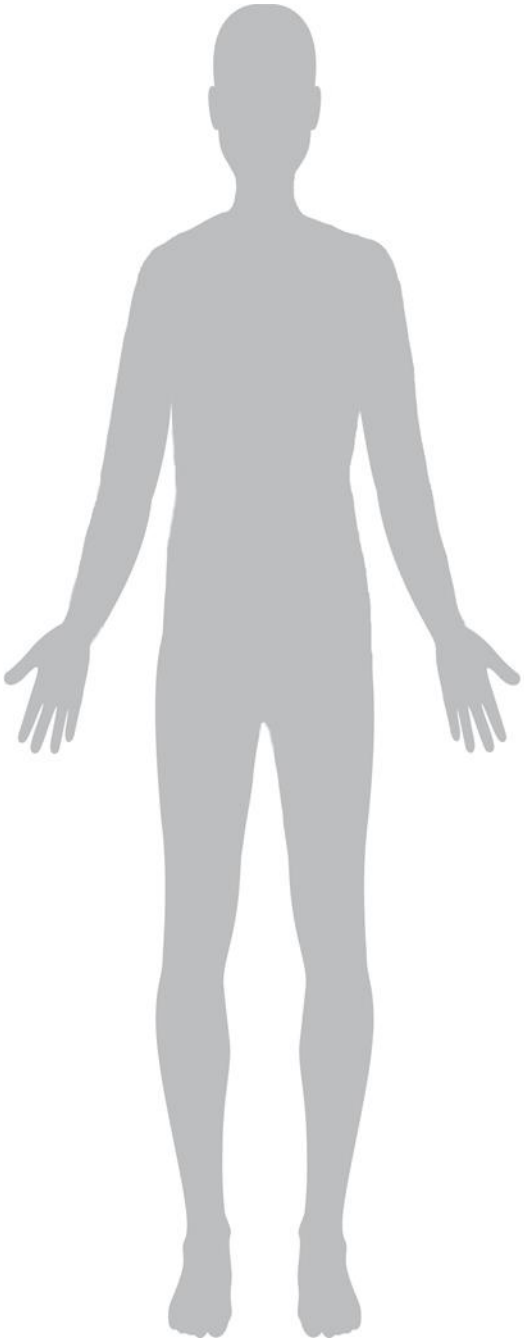
To learn more about Ellen Agler and The END Fund, click here.

Notes

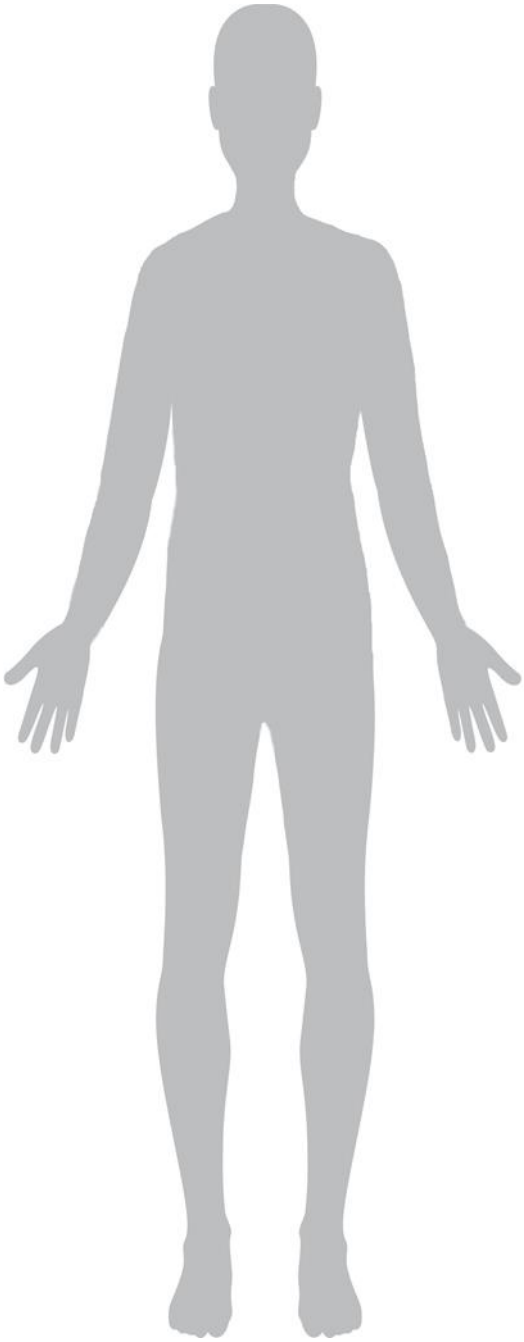
Mindful Movement

Silhouettes

Before



After



Mindful Movement

Notes

Silent Personal Reflection

Use the space below to free-write reflections and observations from a place of care and non-judgment. You might consider some of the following questions:

- What are you learning?
- What are you discovering about yourself?
- Have you been challenged?
- What strategies have been useful?

Personal Reflection

Self-Compassion Exercise

Compassion starts with self-compassion. We cannot develop deeper levels of compassion without attention first to compassion towards ourselves.

We first begin by practicing **awareness**. Observe how you relate to yourself without a judging or self-accusatory tone.

How do you talk to yourself? What tone do you tend to use with yourself? Are there phrases you tend to say to yourself often? What is your general attitude toward yourself?

Reflect on your responses above. Does your self-talk seem to be **balanced**, constructive, and helpful? Is there anything you'd like to let go of?

Becoming your own ally[5]

How easy for you it is to ignore your own needs and focus on the needs of others?

Are there any recurring themes in your self-talk? (e.g. appearance, career, relationships, parenting)

If you notice a flaw or mistake, how do you talk to yourself?

Does your self-talk motivate you to action?

What might it look like for you to truly accept yourself?

[5] From: Kristin Neff. ***Self-Compassion.*** 2011. Hodder & Stoughton

What is your approach when you are faced with challenges? Notice where your attention is drawn – your needs, the challenge, other distractions?

Self-compassion requires the following three key elements[6]":

- **Self-kindness** is being gentle and understanding with ourselves instead of being harsh and judgmental. It is not only stopping judgment or harshness towards oneself, but also actively seeking ways to soothe and comfort, just as we would respond to a dear friend in need.

- **Recognition of our common humanity** prevents isolation and alienation when we are in pain. It's important to stay connected to others, even when we are suffering. In fact, it's important to stay connected to others *especially* when we are suffering.

- **Mindfulness** holds our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring or fueling our pain. Non-judgement towards ourselves is essential to an effective mindful practice. Let go, begin again. I fall, I rise—again and again.

Learning these skills is a process. It requires practice. Think about how you can apply these ideas. Are there any changes you want to make?

[6] From: Kristin Neff. ***Self-Compassion.*** 2011. Hodder & Stoughton

Practice Resources

Mindful Movement: Restorative Yoga

Click to view a video of Gayla Marie Stiles leading a mindful movement practice: Restorative Yoga

Like active movement poses, restorative yoga sequences are designed to support our innate resilience and provide rest to unwind after stressful events.

Restorative yoga postures support rest by elongating breathing patterns which engage the parasympathetic nervous system, thereby promoting our body's innate ability to auto-regulate. In addition, passively supporting the body in yoga postures (through use of props if available or by resting in postures for extended periods of time) re-educates any anatomical misalignments. Sequences of restorative postures facilitate deep stages of rest allowing the body to manage energetic imbalances, recover from illness or injury, heal the bi-products of chronic stress and fatigue and recharge depletion.

These restorative postures can be linked together or experienced piecemeal. Typically used to transition to sleep.

Practice Resources

Meditation: Loving-Kindness

Click to hear audio of Sharon Salzberg leading a meditation: Loving-Kindness

To practice loving-kindness meditation, sit in a comfortable and relaxed manner. Take two or three deep breaths with slow, long and complete exhalations. Let go of any concerns or preoccupations. For a few minutes, feel or imagine the breath moving through the center of your chest – in the area of your heart.

Loving-kindness is usually practiced first towards oneself. Since we often have difficulty loving others without first loving ourselves. Sitting quietly, mentally repeat, slowly and steadily, the following or similar phrases:

May I be happy. May I be safe.

May I be healthy and well. May I live with ease.

While you say these phrases, allow yourself to sink into the intentions they express. Loving-kindness meditation consists primarily of connecting to the intention of wishing ourselves or others happiness. However, if feelings of warmth, friendliness, or love arise in the body or mind, connect to them. Allowing them to grow as you repeat the phrases. As an aid to the meditation, you may holds an image of yourself in your mind's eye. This helps to reinforce the intentions expressed in the phrases.

After a period of directing loving-kindness towards yourself, bring to mind a friend or someone in your life who has deeply cared for you. Then slowly repeat phrases of loving-kindness toward them.

May you be happy. May you be safe.

May you be healthy and well. May you live with ease.

As you say these phrases, again sink into their intention or heartfelt meaning. And, if any feelings of loving-kindness arise, connect the feelings with the phrases so that the feelings may become stronger as you repeat the words.

As you continue the meditation, you can bring to mind other friends, neighbors, acquaintances, strangers, animals, and finally people with whom you have difficulty. You can use the same phrases, repeating them, or make up phrases that better represent the loving-kindness you feel towards these beings.

Sometimes during loving-kindness meditation, seemingly opposite feelings such as anger, grief, or sadness may arise. Take these to be signs that your heart is softening, revealing what is held there. You can either shift to mindfulness practice – with whatever patience, acceptance, and kindness, you can muster for such feelings – direct loving-kindness toward them. Above all, remember that there is no need to judge yourself for having these feelings. You might begin by practicing loving-kindness meditation for 15 minutes daily or as often as you are able and gradually extend to 20, 30 minutes or longer depending on your situation and inclination.

Practice Resources

Garrison Institute Meditation Groups

BIPOC Meditation Sangha

The Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) Sangha is a weekly gathering of self-identified BIPOC practitioners that provides a safe place to meditate and explore contemplative practices. **Click here to register.**

Noontime Virtual Meditation Group

In the spirit of holding space for community and connection, the Garrison Institute offers a Noontime Meditation Group, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Meditators of all levels are welcome. **Click here to register.**

Practice Resources

Download Mobile App

Care for Caregivers: Skills for Resilience through Meditation & Mindful Movement

Led by Sharon Salzberg and Gayla Marie Styles

Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

The Care for Caregivers app provides eight guided meditations that you can watch any time, anywhere, and at your own pace, each between 5-6 minutes long.

"Nothing has to take a long time. You don't have to explode your to-do list. Just short moments…will transform your day."

–Sharon Salzberg

Be well, Serve well.

GARRISON INSTITUTE CBR PROJECT