

Compassionate Action During Hard Times

by Helen Correia

At the heart of compassion is the sensitivity to suffering, and our desire to alleviate it activates our urge to respond. When we see tragic events across the world, like floods and bushfires, international war, or we experience tragedy in our own lives, we ask ourselves: what can I do, how can I respond? If we are close by as the crisis unfolds, it may be clearer how to help people survive. But if we're further away, or time has passed, it may be harder to know how to support healing, recovery, or to prevent future suffering. We have a deep motive to care but we can feel stuck, overwhelmed, helpless to know what action to take. In these situations, our practice of compassionate action may need to start with a pause to steady ourselves and reflect.

Starting with ourselves

If we feel stuck or helpless, our practice of compassionate action can begin with compassion to ourselves. We can be mindful of our present experience, appreciating our commitment to care, and acknowledging that we are human, with limits in what we can do. We can use our breath and body to help settle and steady our mind. From this place of greater balance and equanimity, we can see more clearly the actions we can take, with the strength of compassion to turn towards the suffering we see. Before taking action, we can reflect on how we can most skilfully respond.

- **What is my intention?** Clarifying our intentions can be a compass to help guide our actions. If our intention is to alleviate suffering and be helpful, we can use a compassionate practice to bring to mind the people or communities we seek to support.
- **What is needed?** Skilful responding is based on knowledge and understanding of what is needed. If it's unclear, we can search the web with a compassionate lens and caring intention to find "how to help ... " for websites or local groups online that may help give us direction (such as how to help [after the floods](#)).
- **What can I offer?** Before we act, it's important to ask, what resources can I offer that may be helpful - time, skills, financial, material, physical? We must also bring compassion to ourselves and acknowledge our limits. Healing and recovery are an unfolding process, so we can plan to be helpful in a way that sustains our resources, allowing us to continue to offer care in the future.
- **What is one step can I take?** We can't address every world problem at once, but we can start our compassionate action by committing to just one step, one action, in the here and now.

- **Collective compassion in action.** We don't have to do it alone. If we make an ongoing commitment to be helpful, we can also seek out other people, groups and networks who have a shared intention and commitment to care. Connecting with other people in this way can be uplifting, a form of self-compassion.

Compassionate action from the inside out

When we understand the causes and conditions of suffering, we can make every action count to alleviate and prevent suffering. Every war begins with the seed of ill-will, so if we want to contribute to world peace, we can start with the world of our own mind. In the book *"How to fight"*, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen Buddhist teacher, says, "Any peace talks should begin with making peace with ourselves". So, our practice of compassionate action begins with letting go of ill-will towards ourselves. We can extend this outward and ask ourselves: how can I cultivate peace in my relationships...how can I resolve disagreements with non-violence... how can I practice non ill-will each day in my community? If natural disasters cause suffering, and these are increasing with climate change, we can ask ourselves, what action can I take to reduce my environmental impact? If we understand that life is ever-changing then can we bring gratitude to what we have now and bring this gratitude into every interaction. No matter how small, every one of our actions creates a ripple effect, so in hard times when we're unsure of how to respond, compassionate action can start from the inside out.