

“ . . . an illuminating and healing gateway to what is deepest
and best in ourselves.” —JON KABAT-ZINN, PH.D.,
author of *Full Catastrophe Living*

a new
approach
to life's
challenges



THE COMPASSIONATE MIND

PAUL GILBERT, PH.D.
author of *Overcoming Depression*

“For a long time, Paul Gilbert has been making seminal contributions to our understanding of compassion and how, if systematically cultivated, it can become a force for greater good both in our hearts and in the world. This book offers a deep and compelling evolutionary perspective on the human brain, mind, and culture. It demonstrates how much meaning and our well-being hinge on our innate capacity to extend heartfelt compassion to ourselves and to others. It also guides us in working skillfully with deeply ingrained tendencies such as anxiety, anger, and depression, so they do not dominate our lives and erode our health and happiness. Written with a deep sense of kindness towards all who suffer, including himself, this book is a very friendly, practical, and potentially illuminating and healing gateway to what is deepest and best in ourselves, often completely unknown or unrecognized by us.”

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“In this impressive volume, Paul Gilbert offers compelling insight into a key challenge of our time: compassion. The reader will find a conceptual and practical guide to cultivating a more compassionate mind. The author gracefully integrates evolutionary neuroscience, cognitive behavioral therapy, Jungian archetypes, attachment theory, Buddhist psychology, and over thirty years of clinical experience into a book you won’t want to miss. Dozens of accessible exercises make this book especially helpful for readers who want to transform their lives for the better.”

—Christopher K. Germer, Ph.D., clinical instructor in psychology at Harvard Medical School and author of *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*

“Paul Gilbert has created a masterpiece urging us to harness the power of our minds to shape our brains toward compassion and kindness. Exploring the science of our ancient neural circuitry and weaving this with our contemporary cultural pressures, *The Compassionate Mind* takes us on a powerful journey into the origins of the challenges that keep us from living life with meaning, connection and resilience. Once we’re well-prepared with this fascinating background, Gilbert shows us in useful detail the personal practices that enable us to sharpen our skills of compassion for ourselves, for others, and for the larger world in which we live. The result is not only increased happiness and better physical health, but more meaningful relationships with others, and even a better relationship to our planet. There is no better time than the present to learn these important steps to enhance our individual and collective lives, and even to transform our place in the ‘flow of life’ on Earth.”

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“Anyone who struggles with their inner critic should make sure to read this book. Professor Gilbert writes in a masterly fashion about compassionate mind training, an innovative approach which is likely to grow in importance over the next decade as the evidence for its benefits continues to build.”

“Paul Gilbert has come forth again with a book about the mind, its unused potential, and how to harness that potential to one’s and others’ benefit. *The Compassionate Mind* is a road map to compassion for the self and towards others. It is a book for those curious enough to explore their hidden potential to attain a special kind of humanness and happiness. A ten on a scale from one to ten.”

—Michael McGuire, author of *Darwinian Psychiatry*

“Internationally-renowned psychologist Paul Gilbert has provided all of us with a much-needed book. Written with wisdom and warmth, Gilbert takes us on a journey through the far reaches of evolution to the very depths of our own hearts. This helpful and thoughtful guide to living a compassionate life—for yourself and for others—will be a reminder for many of us that we are all human but that we need to be more humane toward our own troubled selves. Throughout this book, the reader will feel like the author is speaking directly to him or her, and will recognize that it is possible to use the tools of modern psychology to fix what feels broken inside of us. A timely book for a time when competitiveness, materialism, and narcissism have failed us. This book provides timeless wisdom that you can use every day. It will make a wonderful gift for someone you care for, especially if you give it to yourself.”

—Robert L. Leahy, author of *The Worry Cure* and president of the International Association for Cognitive Psychotherapy

“Paul Gilbert is one of the most brilliant scientists studying compassion today. In this wonderful book, he makes his theories very accessible and down-to-earth. You feel like you’re having a chat in his living room with a warm cup of tea. I also love his easy-to-follow exercises, which offer concrete ways to help you develop greater compassion in daily life.”

—Kristin Neff, associate professor of human development at the University of Texas at Austin

“The increasing drive to find a competitive edge in all aspects of our lives may create efficiencies, but they are cold, heartless, and unpleasant to live with. Gilbert shows how and why this occurs, and explains why our capacity for compassion is the antidote.”

—Oliver James, author of *Affluenza* and *The Selfish Capitalist*

THE COMPASSIONATE MIND

a new approach to life's challenges

PAUL GILBERT, PH.D.

New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

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We have sought to research this in some detail – in particular, with regard to issues linked to shame and self-criticism. Here I would like to thank my research colleague Chris Irons who, over many years, worked on various models of compassion with me. I'm also delighted to thank enthusiastically my current, wonderful research team of research coordinator Corrine Gale and researcher and data analyst Kirsten McEwan. They work fantastically hard and with dedication. Special thanks, too, go to Helen Rockliffe for her enthusiasm and hard work while with us. My secretaries – Diane Woollands over many years (now retired – sorry if I wore you out) and recently Sue Branningan and Lesley Fulter – offered excellent support with proof-reading and reference checking. Special thanks also go to Keith Wilshire for his masterly management of our research unit for keeping us all afloat and getting me back into guitar playing and recording with 'Still Minds'.

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University of Derby and the (now) Derbyshire Mental Health Trust. Without their support, our research and new approach would not be possible, so I'm extremely grateful for their vision and long-term encouragement. I would also like to thank the British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies, which has always given me a sense of belonging and welcome, and asked me to be president in 2003. Here are folk dedicated to research on both process and outcome and who remain dissatisfied with all current psychotherapies and want to improve them. Although I'm rather more focused on biological and evolved processes, deeply flavoured with attachment theory, Jungian archetypes and non-conscious processes than some colleagues, they have always treated me kindly and given me many platforms from which to present my views. Without their support and openness, we wouldn't be where we are today. Whether any of our current psychotherapeutic schools and tribes can maintain themselves in the face of psychological research and not become simply 'evidence-based psychological therapies' is unclear. With things changing so fast now, who knows what will exist in the future? Special thanks go to Professor Bob Leahy, fellow cognitive behaviour therapist from New York, for his scholarship, friendship and passion for passion (emotions) in therapy – I said I wouldn't mention the pub singing.

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And as always, love goes to my children Hannah and James, who have taught me so much about the power of love of kin. Love, too, to Jean – my wife, drinking partner, cricket sharer, collaborative researcher and love of my life for well over 30 years. God, are we that old? The NHS doesn't allow sabbaticals for book writing, so for the past years, it's been 5 a.m. starts trying not to wake my beloved.

In the months before this book was complete, Dr Simon Thomas, a long-term clinical psychologist and therapy colleague and a truly lovely man of whom we were all deeply fond, died at the age of 49 after a long battle with cancer. And then my father developed a fast-growing cancer that changed him rapidly from being bright-eyed and active to confused and wanting to go. I was able to be with him in the last days. These events somehow harmonized for me what compassion is about – facing the realities and tragedies of life – and made me understand why I was writing in the early hours. So I dedicate this book to all of us who may take joy in life but suffer from being alive.

Introduction

Compassion can be defined in many ways, but its essence is a basic kindness, with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and of other living things, coupled with the wish and effort to relieve it. Although humans can engage in intensely cruel and callous behaviour (and, looking back at human history, they often have), for more than 3,000 years, compassion has been understood to be one of the most important and distinctive qualities of the human mind. Not only has it been encouraged as a spiritual and moral pursuit in many religions, but compassion has also been seen as a major healing process for our turbulent minds and relationships.

Although most religions recognize its power, it was within the Eastern traditions – and especially Mahayana Buddhism, the school of the Dalai Lama – that exercises and mental practices were developed to train the mind in compassion. In these traditions, developing compassion is like playing a musical instrument – it's a skill that can be enhanced with dedicated practice. These traditions also portray the development of compassion as having far-reaching consequences in terms of how the mind organizes itself, how we experience ourselves and the world, and even the ultimate reality of our sense of self.

Until relatively recently, the impetus for developing compassion and the way of doing it came primarily from spiritual and religious traditions. What is extremely exciting is that the last 30 years or so have seen the science of psychology and studies of the human brain begin to put compassion, caring, and pro-social behaviour centre stage in the development of well-being, mental health and our capacity to foster harmonious relationships with each other and the world we live in.

Shortly after the Second World War, researchers such as Harry Harlow (1905–81), who worked with monkeys, and the child psychiatrist John Bowlby (1907–90) began to study the impact of the caring relationship that infants had with their mothers. It was found that a mother's love and affection had a huge impact on the emotional development of the infant, child and subsequent adult. In the 1950s and 1960s, John Bowlby outlined the approach to human development that he called 'attachment theory'. This focused on the quality of the attachment relationship in terms of the accessibility and affection of the parent in soothing and regulating the infant's emotions. Indeed, we have probably all seen how young children become distressed if they lose contact with their mother and how, in the normal course of events, the return of the mother calms the infant down. Bowlby helped us to recognize that, from the day we're born, our brains are *biologically designed* to respond to the care and kindness of others. Indeed, his work has stimulated a revolution in our understanding of the importance of affection at many stages of our lives. When we're distressed, kindness helps; when we're facing tragedies such as the loss of loved ones, the kindness of others helps; if we're having to face our own death, then feeling loved and wanted is important to our ability to face it. We now know that close friendships and affectionate relationships play a huge role in our mental health and well-being and influence how our bodies work. For example, people in affectionate relationships show lower levels of stress hormones and higher ones of 'happy' hormones than those in relationships characterized by conflict. Research has also shown that the way we relate to *ourselves* – whether we regard ourselves kindly or critically, in a friendly and affectionate way or hostilely – can have a major influence on our ability to get through life's difficulties and create within ourselves a sense of well-being. All over the world now, researchers in many different fields are beginning to explore the power of kindness and affection and the ways to harness it.

This is not a moment too soon, of course. We are confronted with considerable crises linked to lack of compassion and of care for each other and our environment. We have become trapped by a competitive world that only seeks efficiency and profit maximization. Each of us has a brain that has evolved over millions of years and is very sensitive to the social context in which it lives. So while we can be compassionate, kind and selfless in some (cooperative and supportive) contexts, in others (competitive and threat-focused), we can be ruthless, cruel and very self-absorbed. So from understanding the importance of affection on how our brains and bodies work and how modern culture operates on our psychology and our brains, tuning compassion up or down, we're learning more and more about the importance of deliberately harnessing and focusing compassion.

A personal journey

My own interest in compassion and the eventual writing of this book grew out of lots of different strands in my life. So let me take you behind the scenes and consider some of them. We can go back 40 years to when I was introduced to Jungian concepts of archetypes while doing my A-levels in the 1960s. These were the days of 'liberal studies', and we had a fascinating young teacher who lectured from his just-finished PhD on something like 'A Jungian Analysis of the Novel'. We'd look at the plots and characters of various books in terms of underlying archetypes and the common themes of human history, such as the hero, the villain, the sacrifices of love and loyalty, vengeance from betrayal, the death of the hero and so on – great stuff. Archetypes, which George Lucas used to write his *Star Wars* movies, speak to the innate aspects of our minds, the source of the repeating desires and relationships that echo down through history – as we will see later in this book.

However, although even as a teenager the idea of becoming a psychologist was starting to shimmer in my mind (assuming I couldn't make it with my rock band), my main studies were in politics and economics and so I pursued those at university. I became very interested in how economic relationships impact on lifestyle and life quality, a theme that Karl Marx addressed. Marx was also a great fan of Darwin and Darwin was 'honoured' to receive a copy of Marx's *Das Kapital* in 1873 and wrote to him that '... we both earnestly desire the extension of knowledge and that this is in the long run sure to add to the happiness of mankind'. According to Marx's biographer Francis Wheen, on 1 March 1883, 'As Marx's coffin was being lowered into the earth of Highgate cemetery, Engels declared: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in human nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history."'¹

The link between our evolved psychology and the economic systems in which we live, in the creation of misery or happiness, has never been well articulated. Unfortunately this evolutionary approach was to falter following the over-medicalizing and pathologizing of human misery – something that it has constantly tried to pull back from. As you will see, this link – between our evolved minds and our social conditions in the creation of compassion or cruelty, happiness or unhappiness – permeates this book.

Suffice it to say that, at this youthful time of my life, economic justice and equality were very much the concerns of myself and my friends. But my dream to become a psychologist had grown even stronger and so, lucky for me, I had the chance to retrain in psychology at Sussex University in 1973-75. Unfortunately I failed my neurophysiology paper and had to study for another year. This rather ill-fitted with my style as a dyslexic, academic limbo dancer – just getting through. So I worked as a night psychiatric nurse, met my wife and got to play lots of cricket. Failures often have a bright side. I'm still happily married and play some cricket and my time on a psychiatric unit taught me a lot about the suffering of mental illness. My PhD studies at Edinburgh were on depression, and then,

1980, I became clinically qualified and released on to an unsuspecting world.

My long fascination with Jung and archetypes led to what became known as evolutionary psychology and then, for me, studies of how our evolved minds set us up for all kinds of difficulties including anxiety, depression, paranoia and the rest. I was fortunate enough to get to know and converse with Professor Aaron Beck, the pioneer of cognitive therapy, on a number of occasions. He too, was interested in the deep evolutionary dynamics of our minds, but felt we should focus our therapy on people's conscious thoughts and teach them ways to help themselves. In his view, it's what goes through your mind today that affects your suffering rather than reflections on the past. This remains a controversial position, and while many psychologists still recognize the importance of our work with the past, the common-sense approach of cognitive therapy became very popular with a number of professionals – not only psychologists but also nurses, psychiatrists and social workers. The psychologists who adopted it then rushed off to develop its research base.

Still, although working with people's current thoughts, behaviours and feelings is immensely helpful, there's the little problem of the human brain and the fact that it's been designed to respond to kindness and affection. Now my own research focused a lot on issues of feeling inferior and defeated – indeed, I called my second book on depression *Depression: The evolution of powerlessness*. Some of my ideas were influenced by my economics degree, which had planted the idea that oppression is linked to mental illness. So I was interested in understanding the mechanisms by which our brain links to feelings of inferiority, defeat and oppression. This led me on to the study of shame and self-criticism – the way we can oppress and depress ourselves. However, the issue of *kindness*, which both attachment theory and my interest in Buddhism had alerted me to, haunted me in my therapeutic work and I knew it needed to be integrated into therapy and models of mental disorder. I was lucky in having as PhD students the talented Steve Allen and Chris Irons, who studied the interaction between attachment experiences and those of power and subordination. Their work and our many conversations helped to sharpen my thinking.

I was also fortunate that, during the 1980s, a group of us were able to meet every few months to share ideas about the interaction between the innate aspects of our minds and the way our early and social environments can bring out the best or worse in us. Those attending included: my wife Jean, who had studied social hierarchies in cockroaches and later undertook qualitative studies with depressed people and those suffering from schizophrenia; ethologist Michael Chance, who had explored different types of social rank hierarchies in monkeys; psychiatrists John Price, who was the first to link mood disorders to feelings of inferiority and defeat as evolved safety strategies, and Leo Sloman of the Clarke Institute, Toronto, who integrated John's ideas with attachment approaches; the Jungian analyst Anthony Stevens, who in the 1960s had studied attachment relationships in a Greek orphanage; and two other psychologists: Dave Stephens, strong in Buddhist interests and practice, and Dennis Trent, who had studied what are called 'pseudo attachments'. John and Anthony went on to write their book *Evolutionary Psychiatry*,² which suggests that the search for status and for connectedness/attachment figures are both powerful archetypal processes in each of us and that mental health problems can emerge from the thwarting or distortion of one or both of these. Those group discussions were exciting – the sharing of research papers mixed with the usual laments about the world . . . and too many chocolate biscuits.

In 1983, two Italian therapists, Victor Guidano and Giovanni Liotti, wrote a very influential book that linked early attachment relationships to various processes that cognitive therapists had been looking at – our styles of thinking about ourselves and others. Some years later, I was lucky to become friends with Giovanni and learned much from his wisdom and insights into the role of early caring relationships on later difficulties.

I was interested in how I could bring these ideas to my more basic cognitive and behavioural work. I did some training in Kleinian psychoanalysis (not my cup of tea) and, in the 1990s, was able to spend four years working in a day hospital run along Jungian lines with Dr H. Ghadiali. I also liked the more open, sharing and collaborative aspects of cognitive behavioural therapy and had spent some happy years walking the streets with agoraphobic people and developing support groups. There's no doubt that gentle exposure to things feared and avoided and practising thinking differently, in an atmosphere of support, were both helpful. However, while some cognitive therapists were increasingly interested in techniques – teaching people logic and testing the evidence of their beliefs – I had become more convinced that that was only part of it. For me, it was how people could begin to 'feel' safe and soothed themselves that was key.

To tackle that, I had to work with how the brain is designed and that took me back to neurophysiology, attachment theory and my interest in Buddhist compassion, and I gradually introduced the idea of kindness into therapy. For example, I'd help people who had negative thoughts about themselves to explore the validity of such thoughts, to see what archetypal patterns they seemed linked to (e.g. fear of abandonment, the heroic need to succeed, the shamed self and its repair) or to discover if they were hiding other, more frightening ones. We'd then try to generate various alternatives and, with practice, bring them into real life. However, patients would sometimes say, 'I understand the logic and agree I'm not a failure, but I still *feel* like one.' So why was their obvious understanding of their problem not helping them feel better?

In my 1989 book *Human Nature and Suffering*,⁴ I had explored research that suggested that we have special brain systems to enable us to feel a sense of safeness, reassurance and pleasurable calming relief, and that this is linked to being cared for and receiving affection. Slowly the penny dropped: if the emotion system that enables us to feel reassurance, relief and safeness isn't working or inaccessible, people may indeed understand something but not feel any reassurance or relief from that knowledge. Just like you can have all the sexual imagery in your head that you like, but if your pituitary gland isn't responding to those images, nothing happens in your body. Other pennies began to drop. It became clear that we had to do much more about exposing people to *positive emotion* and helping them to develop and feel it. However, in a fascinating twist, research was starting to show clearly that there are different types of positive emotion. One is linked to drive and excitement and another is connected to feelings of reassurance, security, safeness and calm peacefulness (see pp. 23–5). I realized that, as therapists, we need to separate these two positive emotion systems very clearly in our minds because, although they're integrated, they also work in very different ways. Indeed, some people will try to create achievements and excitement in their lives precisely because, without that, life seems empty or they find it difficult to feel safe or content. Compassion is very much about stimulating the second type of emotion system. So for me, Buddhism, evolution, Bowlby's attachment theory and studies of the brain and positive emotion started to fall into place. I became convinced that whatever intervention you used, you had to ensure that the patient experienced it with feelings of kindness and warmth.

However, it turned out that helping people develop compassion for others and, especially, for themselves is not always easy. Indeed, some people are positively frightened of it and resistant to the idea. They see self-compassion and self-kindness as a weakness or an indulgence; to them, it means that you're going soft or letting your guard down. If they started to feel self-kindness or compassion it could ignite feelings of grief because they would recognize how alone they'd been feeling for so long. John Bowlby suggested that, if you show kindness in therapy, you can activate your patient's attachment memories. If those memories are of neglect or unkindness, the feelings that result from neglect or unkindness can re-emerge. Far from experiencing the therapist or the procedure as kind

patients experience it through their emotional memories – they feel awkward, anxious and resistant to compassion.

This can be understood through what we call behaviour therapy, which goes back to the work of Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) and his salivating dogs. Let me give you an example. Children have a natural desire to want to play. However, suppose that, every time children start to play, their parents punish them and withdraw affection. Over time, the children will learn that their own desires for play result in punishment, and so they'll inhibit these desires or become anxious if they feel such desires within themselves. We can learn to become anxious about our feelings because of how others have responded to them in the past. Let's look at the desire for care and affection. What happens if a child's desire for care and affection results in neglect, rejection or even abuse? You can see the problem. So when the therapist behaves in a kind way, this can reactivate their patients' (innate) desire for care and affection, but of course, these feelings are associated with great fear, and that's what can flood through the patients – so they turn away from kindness. This realization led me and my team to our most recent research – looking at the fear of compassion. It turns out that, for all kinds of reasons, compassion can be tricky for people.

So that's the background to this book and to my thinking. I wanted to write a book to share with you the excitement and passion of modern psychological research as it explores in detail how we can develop more pro-social behaviour and create compassion and kindness in our world and ourselves. For many years, aggression, anxiety and depression have taken centre-stage in our research, but this is changing.

I also wanted to share with you the struggles we have in being compassionate to ourselves and others. You'll find many self-help books that talk to you about the importance of learning to accept and love yourself, but they don't explain to you why this can be important and why it can be so difficult. So this book is different in the sense that it tries to give you quite a lot of detail about how our minds work. It will explore with you the challenges in life that we all have to face because of the way we've evolved and the societies we've created. There's nothing easy in following a compassionate path, and at times it requires courage (not my strong point). But the evidence is now overwhelming: feeling love and compassion for ourselves and others is deeply healing and soothing and helps us face the many challenges that will come our way.

Throughout the world now there is a gradual movement towards seeking a more compassionate way of living. Although we've learned that we can build efficient systems, cut our costs and do things increasingly cheaply, this is not a very pleasant way to live. We can end up in an efficient world that is uninhabitable – except for the relatively few wealthy. So developing compassion may not be the most efficient way to live but it will add to our well-being. Indeed, when we look around ourselves today many of us will recognize that we're confronted with a world of gross injustice and suffering, and that we find it difficult to be compassionate because we live in deeply non-compassionate societies. We need to think about why this is and what we can all collectively do to change the way we live – but first we have to decide that building compassionate minds and societies *is* what we want to do.

This book

You will see there are two key sections to this book. Part I (Chapters 1–6) comprises my efforts to share with you the excitement of how science can illuminate the way our minds and brains work and why compassion can be a powerful healing process. To develop compassion, it helps to know the details of why this is important and how it works. Part II (Chapters 7–13) gives you a series of discussions and exercises that you can try out to develop your compassionate mind and see if the

help.

Part I: The Science behind Compassion

Chapter 1 explores some of the common ways we experience our lives these days, especially being rushed in our hurry-hurry and 'competitive edge' society. Our emotions, desires and fears can run away with us and we may find it difficult to discover a meaning to our lives. It's also difficult to stand back from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and worries and see ourselves as emergent beings on this planet, in this universe. We can feel disconnected from the 'flow of life' of which we are a part. However, our desires and emotions were built in this flow and we share them with other beings. Understanding where our desires and feelings came from and how they work can be helpful as we embark on the road to compassion. We'll learn that much of what goes on in our minds is not our fault and certainly not our design.

Chapter 2 looks at the implications of our having evolved within the 'flow of life' and of ourselves being part of it. It introduces ten of the challenges that face us. These relate to the fact that we've evolved a brain full of old-fashioned passions and lusts, and a 'new mind' that can activate, amplify and fantasize about these feelings, wants and lusts. Our ability to think and fantasize like this means that our fears and desires can be taken to extremes. As I mentioned above, we've evolved to require enormous amounts of love and affection, both of which influence our brain. We're a species that searches for individuality but also connectedness, conformity and belonging. We have a sense of self-awareness that can be a blessing and a curse. We may become aware that life can be full of suffering and tragedy in the form of illness, injury and death and various losses to ourselves and those we love. The final challenge focuses on our fear and anxiety about compassion and kindness. Compassion, fairness and justice are not cost-free. Learning to face up to the hardships of compassion is important to its development.

Chapter 3 explores the idea that all of us 'just find ourselves here' with a brain built by genes that have been evolving over millions of years to pursue desires, passions and ways of relating to each other, and into families and cultures that we never chose. We'll explore the evolved nature of our minds and how being tribal and cruel is as much a part of our innate potential as kindness. However, with the evolution of caring behaviour, especially between mothers and infants, there came into the world, for the first time, the capacity to protect, care and look after another living being. This was to bloom into various forms of compassion. The more we understand the way some of our lives are scripted by inner archetypes and mentalities, the more we can begin to stand back, take control of them and develop those we choose to develop.

Chapter 4 investigates one of the most important mechanisms in our minds – our ability to detect and respond to threats. All living things must be able to do this. However, this system, which harbours our emotions of anxiety, anger and disgust, can also cause major difficulties for us. We will see that our threat system, although designed for self-protection and the protection of those we care about, is quite complicated and can become a dominant process in our lives such that we are easily made anxious, irritable or depressed. We'll come to see that the more threat-absorbed we are, the more difficult compassion can be to achieve.

Chapter 5 will look at the fact that we have two very different positive emotion systems. One is related to drives and pleasures. Winning the lottery, going on holiday and falling in love can make us excited. Knowing that we're going to enjoy something or that it's going to enhance our lives is important because it makes us want to make the effort to do and achieve things. We'll also explore our contentment/soothing system. The feelings that flow from this include peacefulness and a sense

inner calmness and well-being, which are often associated with connectedness – feeling socially safe in the world and valued by others. From the day we're born, kindness, love and affection soothe and calm us and help us to feel less threatened. So, we'll arrive at the fascinating discovery that our contentment system is also linked to affection and kindness. Learning how to harness the capacity for self-soothing through the development of self-kindness and self-compassion is a key part of this book.

Chapter 6 explores how our capacity for imagination and fantasy can be used to stimulate different brain systems. This is the principle on which training our minds in compassion is based because we can learn to understand how compassionate imagery and thinking can stimulate the contentment/soothing system. We will, of course, need to be very clear about what we mean when we use the term 'compassion'. So we'll look at some Buddhist and other spiritual views of it before looking at compassion from a more Western, scientific point of view. We'll see that it's made up of various attributes such as being motivated to care, being sympathetic, being able to tolerate our own emotions, being empathic and understanding of what we feel, and being non-judgemental. There are also related skills that we can learn: compassionate attention, thinking and behaviour, and how to generate compassionate feelings.

This chapter is the last in our section on the science behind compassion. Part I is not fully comprehensive, of course, and over the decades to come, we'll understand far more about how our brains work and how important compassion is. But these six chapters will give you a flavour of it, a springboard to think about yourself in new ways, and also prepare you for the exercises to come.

Part II: Building the Compassionate Self: Skills and exercises

Part II brings us to the exercises that will help you to develop your compassionate mind.

Chapter 7 begins the journey with understanding the importance of what is now called *mindfulness*. This means learning to pay attention in a particular kind of way and recognizing how your brain can go off on all kinds of tangents because of your thinking and fantasies. In mindfulness we learn how to hold attention 'in the present moment' without judgement. So you'll recognize that your mind naturally tends to wander all over the place and it's very difficult to stay focused, but with training you can develop a 'calm mind'. All the exercises in the rest of the book will be engaged with 'mindfully' – that is, when the mind wanders, we will gently and kindly bring it back to its task without judgement or criticism. Without training, 'wandering' is the natural way of the mind, just as when we learn a musical instrument our fingers at first won't go where we want them to.

Chapter 8 will take us into a world of using imagery and creating certain kinds of fantasies that stimulate different emotion systems within ourselves. You'll learn that, just as you can create fantasies of a sexual type which will stimulate your body, so you can also use your fantasy mind to create images that will stimulate your contentment/soothing and affection systems. There are many ways of doing this, but the key is learning *how* to practise, paying attention and creating in your mind thoughts and images that are deliberately designed to stimulate your feelings of compassion and your contentment/soothing system.

Chapter 9 explores compassionate thinking. It's very easy for our emotions to have us reasoning in anxious, angry, fretful or lustful ways. Compassionate thinking is a way of directing your thoughts to be helpful to you. We'll be examining ideas from cognitive and other psychotherapies about how our thinking enables us to construct a world for ourselves in many ways. Learning to recognize the content of our thoughts and how to stand back from them and look at them in different ways can be very conducive to developing compassion and compassionate thinking.

Chapter 10 brings us to a very important theme: how we relate to and treat ourselves. Sadly, the Western world is riddled with people who don't feel happy with themselves, who are critical and self-blaming. Treating yourself unkindly and critically is not good for your brain; it stimulates all kinds of stress. So we'll be addressing this issue very directly, looking at why we become self-critical and what we can do to spot it and to change it. Developing self-compassion, guided by your knowledge of how your brain works (from Part I), can move you forward in important ways.

Chapter 11 focuses on the emotions that can cause a lot of trouble – the self-protective emotions of anxiety and anger. We'll look at these in turn and think of ways in which we can deal with them compassionately, once we've decided that we sometimes need to work in new ways to cope with these powerful emotions.

Chapter 12 takes us on a journey into more complex areas of compassionate behaviour. You'll come to understand why being compassionate is not a soft option or just 'being nice' but can be very difficult, because it means standing up to some of our own desires and refusing to act on some of our lusts or fears. It can also mean recognizing that our intense desire for belonging and connectedness, to be one of a tribe and defend our own interests, can be the source of intense cruelty and atrocity. The tough issue in compassionate behaviour is addressing our own inner tendency towards cruelty. Compassion for ourselves can be important when we see that our capacity for cruelty arises because our brains are designed for self-protection and genetic advancement. This isn't our fault, but feeling compassion for this very fact allows us to take control and to turn against this side of ourselves.

Chapter 13 reflects on how we can bring a compassionate orientation into our lives and eventually begin to build more compassionate societies. The challenges ahead are major and serious, but at the same time, we're gradually waking up to the fact that we're all here without having chosen to be caught up in the flow of life, and that by learning to harness the power of kindness and compassion we can begin to exert more control and create a world that's more fun and harmonious to live in. We're also gradually developing our sciences of the mind so that we'll be better placed to understand how to build lifestyles that are conducive to fostering physical and psychological well-being. This will mean finding new ways to organize and reward our labour because 'competitive edge' economics is driving us all slightly crazy.

It's a long and winding road but, I hope, one that you'll find fascinating and one that will inspire you to bring more compassion into your life. And remember that this is all about *training*. There will be many times when, like me, you'll falter, fall over, have a tantrum or panic attack, be self-focused and eat all the wrong foods. But that's life and we can all learn to be compassionate about these, too.

Throughout the book, I've included various case examples to emphasize certain points. Now, for obvious reasons of preventing identification, the true names and facts have been significantly changed or a case study has been created by combining a number of cases.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND COMPASSION

Compassion: The start of our journey

Life can be tough and perplexing, can't it? Human history is full of stories and reflections on life's tragedies and suffering, as well of its joys and triumphs. Indeed, given the reality of the many challenges that life puts our way, it's hardly surprising that poets, playwrights, authors, artists, philosophers and spiritual seekers – well, just about most people, actually – have all pondered on how to understand life and make our relatively short ones here on Earth meaningful and happy. The challenges may come in the form of coping with our own emotions of fear, anxiety, anger or depression, or with the loss of loved ones, setbacks in our life plans, difficult relationships or painful memories. Then there's the issue of our own fragility in the face of viruses, bacteria, genetic error or injury, all of which can turn our lives or those of the people we love into painful tragedies and reminders of our own eventual decay and death. You can understand why humans were delighted when they discovered red wine!

Even if we are personally at peace with ourselves, we're increasingly aware of the immense suffering in the world and feel inner calls to create a more fair, just and nurturing environment for us all. Our pursuit of meaning, justice and happiness is as much a part of us today as it was centuries ago when humans could first give thought to these things. We can, of course, seek solace in all kinds of ways for the anxiety and anger we feel at 'finding life like this'. Although we in the West now live in a world with advancing medical science, material comforts and pleasures, we still yearn to find deep meaning and sources of inner peace and joy.

This book will offer a guided tour of ways to approach this quest. First, we need to explore what kind of species we are and where we have come from – that is, what's the basis of our nature? Our search will help us recognize that ancient spiritual wisdoms and new studies in psychology and of the brain all point to the same source for meaning and happiness: the cultivation of compassion for ourselves and for others. So in these pages we'll concentrate on the benefits of developing compassion, with a special focus on self-kindness and self-compassion.

The road to compassion

Although many spiritual traditions have long stressed the importance of compassion for our well-being and good relations with other people (see below), it's only recently that researchers have found out just *how* compassion exerts its beneficial effects. This is exciting. One way they've used to discover that compassion is good for us is by studying the brains of people who either are very well practised at compassion or engage in compassionate thoughts and fantasies. Now the thoughts, imaginings and fantasies that we choose to focus on can have very powerful effects on our brain and bodily states and behaviours – something you're probably already aware of. For example, you know that your own sexual thoughts, images and fantasies (even when at home alone) can do 'interesting things' to your brain and body. So it will come as no surprise to learn that, when we fantasize or think about compassion, this does 'interesting things' to our brains and bodies, too. In fact, focusing on kindness, both to ourselves and to other people, stimulates areas of the brain and body in ways that are very conducive to health and well-being. Researchers have also found that, from the day we are born to the day we die, the kindness, support, encouragement and compassion of others has a huge impact on how our brains, bodies and general sense of well-being develop. Love and kindness, especially in early life, even affect how some of our genes are expressed!¹ So it turns out that kindness

and compassion are indeed paths to happiness and well-being.

Old ideas on the nature of suffering

Over the centuries, many spiritual traditions have come to see this life as essentially one of suffering from which we are seeking to escape:

Muslims believe that we are separated from God and are seeking to return. Sufi music can touch the grief of disconnectedness and the yearning/searching for re-connectedness.

Christians believe that suffering in this world is intimately bound up with our relationship with God and that only through God can we end suffering by a return to heaven.

Gnostics think that the creation of the material universe and all life was a mistake, possibly made by an evil deity. Suffering comes from the 'flesh' and its desires, all of which we should renounce.

Hindus believe that we are caught up on a wheel of constant birth and death and we are unsure how to get off of it. They believe that, with the help of Shiva and good works, we can disembark from the wheel of life and its death-and-rebirth cycle.

Buddhists also believe in a cycle of reincarnation in which we are trapped. For them, suffering arises from our attachments and grasping after things and achievements, and we can free ourselves only by developing an enlightened mind. We do this by recognizing that the mind we're born with is chaotic and grasping, but through training it in mindfulness and compassion, we can experience a different reality.

Other spiritual traditions explain suffering as the result of being tested by God and, if found wanting, discarded. Others believe that the soul has to learn spiritual lessons through suffering, which is the point of reincarnation. The soul must take a developmental journey, like in the game Snakes and Ladders: in some lives, you go forward and in others you can go back. Many religions believe that bad lives are punished after death – some of them rather nastily.

All of these traditions have little to say about genetic variation, brain damage or how being born into loving or abusive families can affect the way our brains grow and our (bad) behaviour. Those who believe in reincarnation also don't explain why, just as you acquire some wisdom, you die, forget everything and have to start all over! Some scientists, once they'd discovered how genes and evolution are the basis for all life forms and that 'male' and 'female' were fairly recent genetic solutions to the survival of genes, argued strongly against belief in these traditions. However, these traditions were never intended to be seen as factual, but instead came into being to help us cope with a harsh life of suffering and to unite people in common purpose.

Compassion and kindness

However, in *all* these traditions, you'll also find a strong emphasis on the importance and power of compassion, both as a spiritual focus and as a way of enhancing our social relationships, our relationship with ourselves and happiness. Buddhism, in particular, has been very focused for thousands of years on deliberately developing compassion.²

Within Buddhism, 'compassion' and 'kindness' have different meanings:

- *Metta* is loving kindness or friendly care, which is an orientation to self and others.
- *Mudita* is appreciating and taking joy from being alive 'in this moment' (e.g. the colours of

clouds, a rainbow or sunset, the taste of food). It also refers to ‘sympathetic joy’ – joy from the well-being of others. It is the wellspring of peaceful well-being.

- *Karuna* is compassion that involves ethical behaviour, patience and generosity with action.
- *Upekkha* is equanimity and a sense of connectedness/similarity to other humans and all living things – that all seek happiness and none seeks suffering, that we are all the same in our struggles in life.

Western psychology makes different distinctions between types of positive feelings, their evolved functions and their focus. Note, too, that ‘feeling compassion’ can involve sadness and grief for the tragedies in which living things are caught up.

Now compassion is not just about a moral position or anything as simple as ‘if I’m nice to you you’ll be nice to me’, but is actually a way of *training* our brains that affects connections in them in a very important way.³ In the second half of this book, you’ll find a number of exercises that will help you develop compassion for yourself and others and stimulate feelings of safeness, acceptance, peacefulness and contentment.

So that’s the good news. However, it turns out that the road to compassion is not an easy one. Indeed, if it were, then given that we’ve known about the value of compassion for thousands of years we would now be living in a rather nicer world than we are. So we need to arm ourselves with a understanding of the *challenges* that lie before us at the start of our journey into developing our compassionate minds – these we will explore in the next few chapters. We will also see that compassion can require courage, but courage is easier to summon up when we have compassion (see Chapter 11).

Life in a rush

Now, if you are anything like me, you probably find life a bit tricky – well, at least sometimes. On the one hand, there are many things in life we love and enjoy: the affection of those close to us; waking up on the first day of a holiday; walking in the hills where the air is fresh and the sky is a crisp blue and white; sex; food; and, of course, that glass of wine at the end of a hard day – quite a lot of things when we think about it. On the other hand, we can have days of feeling rushed and harassed, when we might feel a bit lost, stuck, tired, anxious, frustrated and in low spirits, when life seems somewhat pointless and meaningless. On top of that, there’s constant news of all the wars, traumas, conflicts and problems in the world. Despite our desire to be happy, prosperous and good, many of us have feelings, emotions and moods that we don’t particularly like or want but which just come and sweep over us. We might even feel them on that holiday. You know the kind of thing. Maybe we wake up feeling a bit irritable on a short fuse, or anxious and tired, or down in the dumps. Our moods just seem to fluctuate sometimes, don’t they, without us being able to pinpoint any particular reason – we simply have good days and less good days. Or we might start the day okay and then we get time pressured or something frustrating happens that puts us in a bad mood.

The problem is that, once we are in a bad mood, things can spiral. We can start to feel rushed and then forget things, and that annoys us even more. We get home and then, unintentionally, are irritable with our partner and they, not surprisingly, are irritable back. We might have been hoping for a romantic evening and now that has all gone pear-shaped. Or it might be that we are very tired and snappy at the children, at their extra demands, bickering and fighting. We feel frustrated with them, frustrated with ourselves and frustrated with life – even with the family cat. We can find ourselves simply

reacting to things with whatever emotions seem to be at hand. Even though, aware that this is not what we want to feel or do, and a voice in our head suggests a change to our behaviour, our emotions appear to pull us right on along, seeming to be so ‘in the body’ and at the root of us. So before we know it, we have rushed through the day leaving a swirl of half-done things, abandoned aspirations and personal disappointments in our wake. A friend of mine who read this chapter smiled and said, ‘And that’s just on the good days.’ Well, it’s not always so bad, but life *can* be tricky at times.

It’s really quite strange because many of us live in a world of unprecedented wealth and comfort. Yet despite our apparently insatiable drive for efficiency, the competitive edge and the ‘business model’ influencing all aspects of our lives, there is no evidence that this is making us any happier than we were 50 years ago. Actually there is evidence that we are becoming more unhappy and irritable. Levels of stress increase in our hurry-hurry society.

After the Second World War, the focus was on welfare and building better communities. So, in Britain, we built the National Health Service, new universities and a rail service that actually worked and didn’t treat people like cattle. These were institutions that were, in many ways, the envy of the world. During the 1960s, we were led to believe that science and technology would gradually increase our leisure and family time, would enable us to retire earlier and earlier and generally would concentrate on increasing human well-being.

This philosophy of building societies for our ‘welfare’ is now all but gone, replaced by the need to maintain ‘competitive edge’ and make ‘efficiencies’, fear of unemployment, and the problems of running increasingly complex and expensive services such as health, education and transport. In fact we’re experiencing exactly the opposite of a release from the drudgery and time pressures of work. As Madeline Bunting⁴ points out in her provocative book *Willing Slaves*, we are working longer hours, the retirement age has just been extended, the insecurity of a job market with short-term contracts is worse than ever and, in profession after profession, one hears stories about too rapid change, under-resourcing and not enough time to attend to quality. There is a depressing shift away from welfare-focused and ‘quality of life’ politics towards the business model, which is focused on shareholder dividends and ‘efficiencies’, often at the expense of quality and a concern with human welfare.⁵

In fact, since the 1970s the profit-maximizing business model has infiltrated every aspect of our waking hours. In many facets of our lives, both personal and at work, we are consumed with meeting targets – the things that we feel or are told we must do. A businesswoman friend, lamenting the focus on individual targets and the demise of supportive working in her job, noted with a half smile, ‘You know, the other day I found myself thinking about my sex life as a target – and whether I could keep up the 2.5 times a week average! At the moment, I think I can only manage the 0.5 – and, of course, I feel a bit of a failure and let down.’ I never quite worked out what she did for the 0.5.

Despite our wealth and comforts, half of us will have some kind of mental health problem at some point, with depression, anxiety, alcoholism and eating disorders topping the list. The World Health Organization has worked out that depression will be the second-most burdensome disorder on Earth by 2020 and other mental health problems will be in the top ten. At the time of writing, this is only 10 years away, and by the time you read this book, it will be even less! For women between the ages of 15 and 45, depression is already by far the biggest burden and blight on their lives.

We are also becoming less trusting and feeling more threatened. My wife trained in radiography in the 1960s, when it was unheard of for staff to be threatened in hospital accident and emergency departments – even by the intoxicated. Now in some hospitals, security staff need to be on hand, especially at night, because threats are so regular. Closed-circuit cameras are perched everywhere; the days of leaving one’s door unlocked are long gone.

So why aren't all of our advances in medicine and our ability to travel the world, nip down to the local supermarket for any number of things to eat, have the most fantastic flat-screen TVs with hundreds of channels – why aren't these things making us wonderfully happy as individuals and happy with each other? Well, many reasons have been given to explain this. According to Madeline Bunting, we've become 'willing slaves' to accountants and the need to compete. Oliver James suggests that we're suffering from 'affluenza'⁶ – an addiction to affluence and a need 'for more and more'. John Naish⁷ makes essentially the same point. He notes what evolutionary psychologists have been saying for a long time, that our brains evolved to cope with scarcity, not 'abundance and plenty', and we are born 'seekers' and 'wanters' because, for millions of years, that was often the state we were in. So while we have an evolved mind that seeks out more and more, we are also struggling to say 'no' to our wants and that 'enough is enough'. Add to this little evolutionary glitch the fact that we have a marketing industry that spends billions every year ensuring that we are not content and that we want more and more . . . and you can see the problem.

All these views have much to recommend them. However, there are two other aspects that need to be added. First, we haven't learned how to train our minds for happiness and contentment. Moreover, every message within our families, in school and at work teaches us not to be content because this is 'resting on our laurels', which somehow smacks of laziness or lack of ambition or 'backbone' and dooms us to the backwaters of life. Consider the commercial world: who would regard as a good business any firm that was content with itself, had 0 per cent growth or might even be prepared to shrink?

Second, we have forgotten a key point that Karl Marx made a century and a half ago: the means of production shapes our very consciousness. But of course you don't have to be a Marxist to understand that our working lives are becoming so devouring of time and stressful that we think that only by having more and more can we compensate for that time and offset that stress; each of us is a dog chasing its tail. How often have you heard other people say, 'I worked so hard I deserve this pay increase/a new car/a better holiday/a night out.' It's odd – we feel we have to reward ourselves because we've treated ourselves so badly and are knackered. And we're locked into this because there are mortgages to pay and lifestyles to maintain and no other way of sustaining them without selling our souls to the business model. So it is not (just) our pursuit of affluence that is driving us all slightly crazy, irritable, aggressive, exhausted and self-focused, but the fact that our competitive lives are *incredibly stressful*. In our exhaustion, we are losing contact with each other; watching television has become easier than socializing; drinking a bottle of wine has become easier than practising relaxation meditation and 'mind replenishment'. Mine is the Merlot. The most common complaint that GPs hear day in and day out is, 'Doctor, I'm so tired,' and one of the reasons why television is so popular is because, although it's rather brain numbing, the very passivity of it is just what appeals when you feel so tired. Our lifestyles are physically, mentally and spiritually exhausting us – and we know it!

Karen's story

Karen's situation is rather typical. She worked in a university department, and when a colleague left budget cuts meant that that person was not replaced, so other people just had to absorb the work. A year later, the same thing happened. Slowly the department was afflicted by the 'creeping hourglass' effect and a mixture of worry and anger permeated it. Within a few years, a department that had been a pleasure to work in, where people had had time for each other and had helped each other in their tasks, had become a non-stop 'Sorry, I really haven't got time for you today' and 'How come you haven't finished that report yet?' sort of place. People were cynical about their work and had lost pride

in it, with an attitude of ‘Don’t worry too much about that report – anything will do – anyway, it will all be changed tomorrow in some new reorganization.’ (The NHS is riddled with this type of thinking)

In my work as a clinical psychologist, time and time again I meet people who tell me that quality is constantly being sacrificed in the pursuit of profit and competitive edge. Yet humans derive a sense of satisfaction from being *able to spend time* creating quality. We get pleasure from our creations, and we need to see appreciation in the eyes of others. The business model is more interested in growing large and satisfying stakeholders, not in the job satisfaction or the well-being of its workers.

In Karen’s department, new tough managers were brought in to make tough decisions, with the behaviour sailing close to bullying. Karen felt that the aim of providing quality education was being replaced with the ‘need to compete in the marketplace’. Everybody increasingly felt that the reason for their existence was to put ‘bums on seats’, cheaper and more quickly.

Now this is not an uncommon story, from the top to the bottom of society. In our hearts, we know there is a problem with all this. Economic systems are falling more and more out of tune with what our minds and social relationships actually require: to have a sense of connectedness, safeness and well-being. What is the point of creating a world of more luxurious cars and homes, more TV channels, more brightly lit supermarkets and their ready meals, if most of us are so tired, worried, focused, stressed out and miserable that we hardly notice them anyway – or just see them as expected rewards for our hard work. Even more problematically, as we struggle with the stress and to keep up, we could actually become more vulnerable to mental health problems and, if we can’t keep up, *seriously critical*.

Karen noticed that, as the months passed, it was becoming much easier for her to become frustrated and her anxiety was also increasing. She often had a worry in the back of her mind about whether she had done all she was supposed to – had she forgotten anything? Previously she had been happy and relaxed on Sundays, but now she was often anxious and unsettled, thinking about work on Monday and what she had to do. She started to feel rather trapped in her job and wondered how she might change. She also noticed that, at times, her anxiety would just kick in from nowhere: when waiting for a train that she knew was likely to be crowded, she would start to worry frantically that she would not get a seat or that it might break down. In addition, she was feeling increasingly claustrophobic. Going into a meeting, she started to panic that she might have to fight her corner all over again because budgets were increasingly tight and the finance people had long lost any concern for quality – it was just about surviving now.

A few years earlier, Karen had enjoyed her ‘intimate moments’ with her husband and reading a book before sleep. Now she often felt too tired for intimacy, and she’d be able to read only a page of her book before falling asleep. ‘It’s taken me nearly a year to read one novel,’ she reflected sadly. ‘Trouble is, by the time I get to the end I can’t remember what happened at the beginning!’ And at the back of her mind was the constant worry that her relationship with her children was suffering, again because of a lack of time and her own fatigue, but the family desperately needed her salary to pay the mortgage. She said tearfully, ‘You know, the years are going by so fast. I’m going to turn around to find that my children have left home and I hardly know them.’

Karen was experiencing the effects of the increasingly common problem: living in a society that is continually demanding more and more of her, with no concern whatsoever for her welfare, that is overstimulating her threat and stress systems. Her mild depression was a *natural, normal* consequence of that; her loss of confidence was actually her brain saying, ‘Give up, get out of this fight’ – but, of course, how would she then pay the mortgage?

Like Karen, many of us are now caught up in a culture driven by the ‘business model’ and the need

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