

Compassion Meditation

Breathe, picture the golden light, and wish suffering away — for a loved one, yourself, a stranger, and someone difficult.

15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Moderate



1 Why you should try it

Having compassion means that you want others to be free from suffering and you have the urge to help end their suffering. It is not only vital to a kind and just society but also, research suggests, a path to better health and stronger relationships.

Yet cultivating compassion for others — and yourself — can sometimes feel like an emotionally taxing and demanding task. This exercise walks you through a meditation grounded in simple techniques — paying attention to your breath and guided imagery — to help you nurture compassion toward a loved one, yourself, a neutral person, and even an enemy. It draws on the guided meditation created by Helen Weng and colleagues at the Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin–Madison (a 30-minute audio version is on the GGIA page); the version below is condensed to 15 minutes.

2 The session — Prof. Magee's 15-minute protocol

Follow these timings, not the website's. Set a timer. One session = the 15 minutes below, then 5 minutes of journaling immediately after. At least 4 sessions in your 2-week window — the study trained daily for two weeks.

1'

3'

3'

3'

3'

2'

1 Settling

1 MIN

Settle into a comfortable position and relax. Take a deep breath and release. For a few moments just focus on the breath — notice breathing in, breathing out — and let the sensations of breathing clear your mind of worries.

3 A loved one

3 MIN

Picture someone close to you. Notice how love feels around your heart — warmth, openness, tenderness. As you breathe out, imagine a golden light extending from the center of your heart to them, and silently recite: *"May you have happiness. May you be free from suffering. May you experience joy and ease."* Then think of a time this person was suffering; notice how your heart changes; extend the light with the wish: *"May you be free from this suffering. May you have joy and happiness."*

3 Yourself

3 MIN

Contemplate a time when you have suffered — a conflict, a failure, an illness. Notice how your heart feels. Just as we wish a loved one's suffering to end, we wish our own to end. Imagine the golden light easing your suffering with each exhale: *"May I be free from this suffering. May I have joy and happiness."* Notice how this differs from wishing it for someone else.

3

MIN

A neutral person

Visualize someone you neither like nor dislike — an unfamiliar classmate, a bus driver, a stranger you pass. Think of how this person may suffer in their own life: conflicts, losses, illness. Extend the light and recite: "*May you be free from this suffering. May you have joy and happiness.*" See if the wish can be as strong as it was for your loved one.

3

MIN

A difficult person

Visualize someone with whom you have difficulty — a parent or roommate you argue with, an ex, a coworker. Though you may have negative feelings, think of how this person has also suffered. Extend the light: "*May you be free from this suffering. May you have joy and happiness.*" If it's hard, recall a moment you got along or laughed together, and keep reciting. Notice any tightness in the chest.

2

MIN

All beings

End with the wish for all beings' suffering to be relieved: *just as I wish to have peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering, so do all beings.* Bask for a moment in the joy of that open-hearted wish. You have finished this session.

3**Then journal — 5 minutes, by hand**

- Top of the entry: **date and time.** Entries without both lose credit.
- Write for **5 minutes without stopping** (about 300 words). Messy is fine; stopping is not.
- Before / during / after: how did you feel at each point? Be specific — body, mood, thoughts.
- What surprised you? What felt fake, awkward, or easier than expected?
- **Prompt:** Track the heart: what did you actually feel for the loved one vs. yourself vs. the stranger vs. the difficult person? Warmth, aching, pressure, nothing?
- **Prompt:** Weng's group argues compassion turns suffering from a threat into a goal. Did anything like that show up for you?

4**Evidence that it works**

Weng, H. Y., Fox, A. S., Shackman, A. J., Stodola, D. E., Caldwell, J. Z. K., Olson, M. C., Rogers, G. M., & Davidson, R. J. (2013)

Study participants received either this compassion meditation training or a training aimed at mitigating negative emotion by helping people think differently about a negative event. Participants who completed two weeks of the compassion training demonstrated more altruism — they gave more money to a victim of unfair treatment. What's more, the people who received the compassion training showed different brain activity in response to pictures of suffering: greater activity in regions involved in understanding the suffering of others, regulating emotions, and experiencing positive feelings in response to a reward or goal — in this case, alleviating the suffering of someone in need.

5**Why it works**

This meditation fosters feelings of compassion and concern for others by training people to notice suffering and strive to alleviate it, while at the same time giving people the emotional resources to not feel overwhelmed by the distress caused by that suffering. The researchers argue that the care for others emphasized by the training may have caused participants to see suffering not as a threat to their own well-being but as an opportunity to reap the psychological rewards of an important goal — connecting with someone else and making that person feel better. By first extending compassion to a loved one and to the self, it becomes easier to extend that same compassion to others, even those you may not like — which can reduce hostility and resentment and may improve a strained relationship.

6 Know the research — for your presentation (APA 7)

In your presentation you will explain, **from memory and without notes**, the evidence behind each practice — who studied it, when, and what they found — plus something *not* written on the GGIA site or on this handout. Read these papers (SJNY library or Google Scholar), then follow their citations forward to find **your own article** — one more peer-reviewed study on this topic that is not the source study here (due Sun Dec 6). Take photos along the way; they are your slides.

Weng, H. Y., Fox, A. S., Shackman, A. J., Stodola, D. E., Caldwell, J. Z. K., Olson, M. C., Rogers, G. M., & Davidson, R. J. (2013). Compassion training alters altruism and neural responses to suffering. *Psychological Science*, 24(7), 1171–1180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612469537>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/compassion_meditation. Practice sources: Helen Weng, Ph.D., University of California, San Francisco; Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin–Madison. Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.