



# The Wellness Wire

## Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine

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*An initiative of the Faculty Assembly Steering Committee, the Office of Medical Student Support Services, the Fit & Well Committee, the Assistant Dean of Faculty Development, and the Division of Education and Faculty Development in the Department of Humanities, Health, and Society.*

Greetings as we all learn to reframe our lives during these unprecedented times. Recognizing that working from home and returning to office work safely are both challenging, the Faculty Assembly Steering Committee has launched this initiative to provide resources for faculty and staff to foster our collective well-being.

**Editor: Greg Schneider, MD**

#### Suffering with Another

Sometimes, I feel sorry for the second installment in any trilogy. Typically, the middle child is forgotten. The first book or film gets to launch the adventure and the final portion gets to wrap it up in a climactic triumph (or defeat). The central part can get stuck simply carrying the story. Naturally, there are exceptions, The Godfather, Part II, is clearly the best movie of the series. (OK, I admit there's room for dispute here.) Similarly, in the book version of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, the middle section, the Two Towers, has the distinction of holding what may be the most pivotal moment in the whole story. What makes the episode particularly poignant is that it is small, a simple human act rather than some grand battle or explosive encounter.

What kind of human act? A compelling act of compassion. The protagonist, the hobbit Frodo Baggins and his sidekick Samwise Gamgee discover and capture the deranged creature Gollum, who had been stalking them on their way to Mordor to destroy

the powerful One Ring. Gollum had once possessed the ring, which Frodo now carries, and wants to reclaim it. Sam immediately distrusts Gollum and wants to kill him, but Frodo pities the creature. He has a deeper, more fearful appreciation of the Ring's poisonous sway over its bearer, and can empathize. He understands that Gollum's obsessive, manipulative behavior, in some crucial ways, is not fully his own. Frodo chooses to be merciful to Gollum, releases the creature from restraints, and takes up Gollum's promise to lead the hobbits into Mordor so they can fulfill their quest. Frodo's act of compassion comes back to haunt him but it also allows him to ultimately save the world from tyranny. (Click [here](#) for the filmic portrayal of the scene.)

As the pandemic enters its middle stage, it seems prudent to remember the power of compassion both for others and for ourselves. This invisible disease has held sway over all of us, altering our behaviors, individually and collectively, for good and for ill. We, nevertheless, retain the ability to sustain the best parts of ourselves. We can acknowledge suffering and respond with grace. The very definition of compassion involves "suffering with" another and reacting with a genuine desire to help.

Compassion, decades of evidence now confirm, not only helps manifest beneficence but also is good for our health and the health of others. Honest concern, with an accompanying urge to act, it turns out, is itself therapeutic, no matter the act that follows. Yearning to understand, to forgive, and to comfort may be climactic after all. If Tolkien is correct, the fate of all Middle-earth might depend on it.



## RESOURCES

### Compassion for Ourselves and Others

In their 2019 book Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence that Caring Makes a Difference, physicians Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzealli compile the now decades worth of data that compassion not only is inherently a good thing but has reproducible benefits for both the giver and receiver. Dozens of randomized controlled trials have shown improved health outcomes for patients when they have compassionate caregivers. Similarly, physicians that patients find compassionate appear to experience less burnout and to provide more cost-effective care. (Intriguingly, providers' self-assessments of their levels of compassion show no such associations with health or other outcomes. Doctors seem not as good at estimating their own ability to be compassionate, which likely anyone who has ever been a patient can attest.)

While there is a part of me that is saddened that we have to prove compassion is a good thing, another part is excited to learn that such a simple thing turns out to be so effective. I suspect that this news will turn out to apply not only to doctors and patients but to all of us. If we treat ourselves and one another with compassion, we can all experience the advantages.

Trzeciak and Mazzealli define compassion as "the emotional response to another's pain or suffering, involving an authentic desire to help" (p. xiii). They distinguish compassion from empathy in that second clause: the authentic desire to help. Empathy involves the emotional response to suffering as well but lacks the desire to help or make a difference. Empathy remains as feeling; compassion involves action.

As we weather the next phase of the pandemic, it might feel like compassion is not necessarily a priority, but it could turn out to be pivotal. You might want to check out Dr. Trzeciak's own "conversion story" as he went from a measured, objective critical care physician to a champion of compassion: [TEDxPenn](#).

### World Happiness Report Shows How We Weathered the Pandemic

Worldwide, this report in Greater Good Magazine suggests, nations that approached the pandemic with compassion have fared the best so far. [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/world\\_h](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/world_h)

[appiness report shows how we weathered the pandemic](#)

### What is Compassion?

Greater Good Magazine offers a similar definition of compassion as the book mentioned above but also adds the evolutionary evidence behind the practice. <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition>

### 15 Most Interesting Self-Compassion Research Findings

This article in Positive Psychology emphasizes the benefits of compassion that we direct toward ourselves. When we accept our own pain and we desire to help ourselves, we can break our patterns of anxiety and insecurity, among other things. <https://positivepsychology.com/self-compassion-research/>

### The Scientific Benefits of Self-Compassion

In the same spirit as the article just cited, this piece from Stanford Health gathers the accumulating data on how self-compassion can help us through challenges. <http://ccare.stanford.edu/uncategorized/the-scientific-benefits-of-self-compassion-infographic/>

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