COMPASSION MAY BOOST RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING

A new Center study suggests that as little as two weeks of compassion training — intentionally cultivating positive wishes to understand and relieve the suffering of others — may reduce the distress a person feels when witnessing another’s suffering. It may also improve their ability and likelihood to respond with compassion. The findings may have implications for professions in which people routinely work with others who are suffering, like doctors, law enforcement officers and first responders who experience high levels of distress or empathic burnout.

NEW RESEARCH ON WELL-BEING OF KIDS WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS

In the United States, roughly one in 25 children has a parent behind bars. With parent-child visits potentially contributing to increased behavior problems and anxiety in children, an interdisciplinary team of experts, including Center for Healthy Minds faculty member Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, is setting out to change that. The group has received a grant through UW-Madison to learn how technology can improve parent-child visits and improve kids’ well-being.

CONNECTED AT WORK

Connection is a significant focus area for the Healthy Minds Initiative, a workplace-centered program inspired by the Center’s research. The program, offered through Healthy Minds Innovations, translates previous research into tools to train kindness, empathy and a positive outlook. Learn more about the program and Healthy Minds Innovations — the external, affiliated non-profit associated with the Center for Healthy Minds — at hmatwork.org.

the world we make

2018 CELEBRATION EVENT

OCT. 22, 2018 – MADISON, WIS.

Join Center Director and Founder Richard Davidson, John Wallis, former Chief Marketing Officer of Hyatt Hotels Corporation, Kristen Roman, UWPD Police Chief, and other special guests for an insider’s view of the latest science and why well-being research matters now more than ever in today’s workplaces and communities.

All donors giving a lead contribution of $1,000 or more this year will receive two complimentary registrations. Please join us.

For more information or assistance with your 2018 Center gift, please contact Lorri Houston, Director of Donor Engagement, at LHouston2@wisc.edu or (608) 263-3672.
A space-exploring robot crashes on a distant planet, and in order to gather the pieces of its damaged spaceship, it needs to build emotional rapport with the local alien inhabitants, who happen to speak a different language but whose facial expressions are remarkably human-like. This fantastical scenario is the premise of a video game developed for middle schoolers by Center researchers to study whether video games can boost kids’ empathy, and how learning such skills can change neural connections in the brain.

Recently published research on the game reveals for the first time that as little as two weeks, kids who played a video game designed to train empathy showed greater connectivity in brain networks related to empathy and perspective taking. Researchers found this change in middle schoolers who played the empathy training game in comparison to middle schoolers who played a commercially-available video game with a similar style, but without built-in empathy training exercises. Kids who improved their empathy after playing the empathy training game also showed altered neural networks commonly linked to emotion regulation, a crucial skill that kids in this age group are beginning to develop.

"The realization that brain networks supporting these skills are actually trainable with video games is important because they are predictors of emotional well-being and health throughout life, and can be practiced anytime — with or without video games," says Tammi Krak, a graduate student in psychology at the Center who worked on the project.

On average, youth between the ages of 8 and 18 years rack up more than 70 minutes of gameplay daily, according to data from the Kaiser Family Foundation. This spike in gameplay during adolescence coincides with an explosion in brain growth as teens mature. This is important.

The Kaiser Family Foundation found for the first time that video games can boost empathy, and how learning such skills can change neural connections in the brain.

1. Recognizing the rise and fall of our thoughts and emotions

Emotion charades can be fun and also grow empathy in this age group. In a Center study with 5th graders, experts asked students to act out an emotion and others had to guess what that emotion was. It’s fascinating to see similarities yet distinct differences between students. What might look angry to one person might actually be the actor expressing a completely different emotion. We typically understand others’ emotions based on our own histories and how we experience them ourselves. This practice underscores the reality that we may think we know what others are feeling when in fact we don’t. When we focus on how emotions feel in our own bodies, it is often a helpful way to get at what another person might be feeling.

2. Acting out emotions together

Emotion charades can be fun and also grow empathy in this age group. In a Center study with 5th graders, experts asked students to act out an emotion and others had to guess what that emotion was. It’s fascinating to see similarities yet distinct differences between students. What might look angry to one person might actually be the actor expressing a completely different emotion. We typically understand others’ emotions based on our own histories and how we experience them ourselves. This practice underscores the reality that we may think we know what others are feeling when in fact we don’t. When we focus on how emotions feel in our own bodies, it is often a helpful way to get at what another person might be feeling.

3. Fostering supportive attitudes during teamwork

We’ve discovered that people’s responses to their own mistakes and the mistakes of others is just as — if not more — important than succeeding in the task at hand. Children of various ages are asked to stand in a circle and pass a bell without allowing it to ring. They are not only instructed to be present with their own bodies and sensations, but they also get to experience firsthand how quickly their own turn handling the bell shifts into someone else’s turn. This awareness allows a student to immediately identify what another student may be experiencing. If someone doesn’t succeed in the task at hand, sharing words of encouragement and validating that it’s OK and could have happened to anyone is important.