

# Compassion: Why It Matters in Healing

By Larry Dossey, MD

The most profound healing event I personally remember occurred as I was recovering from anesthesia following an appendectomy. The surgery was a rushed-up affair in the Student Health Center at the University of Texas at Austin, when I was a senior student preparing to enter medical school. I never met the surgeon beforehand; he thought it unnecessary. Neither did I meet the anesthesiologist in advance; he was too busy.

When I awakened, I was anxious, alone, and in pain. I still did not know who my surgeon was, or what he had found at surgery. A nurse appeared at my bedside. She simply held my hand and said softly, "Don't worry. Everything is going to be just fine." Her kind words and lingering touch conveyed to me--powerfully and unequivocally--that everything was going to be all right. It was; the pain vanished, along with the anxiety and sense of isolation. This simple act is seared into my memory as a profound example of the power of compassion and empathy. I became so enthusiastic about nurses I married one!--Barbara--nine years later, 41 years ago. At first glance, there seems to be nothing new about valuing compassion. It's an idea that has been around for thousands of years in both the religious and secular worlds. But perhaps it is the universality of compassion that has lulled us into underestimating its importance. Compassion is a treasure hidden in plain sight, which we often don't notice.

Of course, everyone *says* compassion is important. But when serious illness strikes, compassion is often regarded as less important than physical interventions such as drugs and surgical procedures. However, evidence suggests that compassion and empathy are correlated with positive health outcomes. We are learning that they should not be regarded as optional in medical care, but as fundamental factors that promote recovery from any illness.

Mind-body researcher Jeanne Achterberg was a veteran explorer of indigenous healing methods and the role of imagery and visualization in healthcare. These interests led her to the island of Hawaii around a decade ago, where she spent two years observing the culture and healing methods of indigenous healers, many of whom took her into their confidence and freely shared with her their methods.

Achterberg was interested in exploring whether healers can exert a positive influence on individuals at a distance. She and her colleagues at North Hawaii Community Hospital in Waimea recruited 11 healers to participate in a healing experiment (Achterberg, Jeanne, et al., *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. 2005; 11(6):965-971). The healers had pursued their healing tradition for an average of 23 years. Each of them was asked to select a person they knew, with whom they had previously worked professionally, and with whom they felt an empathic, compassionate, bonded connection, to serve as the recipient of their healing intentions.

Each recipient was placed in an fMRI scanner at a distance from the healers, who then sent their healing intentions to their subjects at random, two-minute intervals that could not have

been anticipated by the recipient. When the fMRI brain scans of the subjects were analyzed, significant changes were found in the brains of the subjects *only* when the healers were sending healing intentions to them, and not during the no-send periods. There was less than one chance in 10,000 that these differences could be explained by chance. When the experiment was repeated, using strangers with whom the healers felt no empathic bonding, no significant changes were found in the recipients' brains during the healing efforts. This study suggests that compassionate, empathic healing intentions can exert measurable physical effects on a recipient, even when the recipient is not even aware when the attempt is being made, and that these effects do not occur when a compassionate, empathic connection is not present. We can summarize this experiment with the old saying, "Love heals."

Medical educators are waking up to the value of compassion in healing. In 2006 medical schools in Israel altered their admission procedures to require the presence of compassion and empathy in every entering medical student. High grades and intellectual skills continued to be important, but were judged insufficient to qualify one for admission. "It bothered us," said Professor Moshe Mittelman, head of the admissions committee at Tel Aviv University, "that here and there you meet a doctor about whom you say, 'He may know medicine, but he is not a decent human being.' We are a school that educates people to work in the medical profession, which is not only science but also humanism and dealing with people" (Taubman, Tamara. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/wanted-medical-student-compassionate-and-personable-1.184944> April 10, 2006).

We are at a landmark moment in western medicine in which compassion and empathy are being recognized as a complement to material interventions such as pharmaceuticals and surgical procedures. The result is a form of healing that is more effective than when either approach is used alone.

I am certain that the wonderful nurse who comforted me with her words and touch those many years ago would not be surprised.

Dr. Larry Dossey is a physician of internal medicine and the author of 12 books on the role of consciousness and spirituality in healing. His book *One Mind: How Our Individual Mind Is Part of a Greater Consciousness and Why It Matters* will be published in October 2013.

Dr. Dossey will deliver a keynote address on healing and prayer during **World Day of Prayer** at **Unity Village** on **September 12, 2013**. Visit Dr. Dossey at his website at: [www.dosseydossey.com](http://www.dosseydossey.com)

Respectively submitted ~ Anna H. Spencer, PhD

Dear Readers, Here is our latest ***Subconsciously Speaking*** offering: Our goal is to share timely information, inspiration and knowledge to all of you. **Due to the divergence of opinions, the editors and publishers of *Subconsciously Speaking* must disclaim all responsibility for opinions expressed by contributors. We do thank them for their contributions to this vast field of study.** Please enjoy and feel free to send this on to others who would also enjoy the readings. **Subconsciously Speaking © ISSN 1045-4942** / In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, any copyrighted work in this message is distributed under fair use without profit or payment for non-profit research and educational purposes only.

**Dr Anna** - publisher, therapist and speaker  
[dranna@wowway.com](mailto:dranna@wowway.com)

*Celebrating 77 grand years on the planet!*

**Founder: International Medical and Dental Hypnotherapy Association® and Infinity Institute International, Inc [dranna@wowway.com](mailto:dranna@wowway.com)**