

The Nature of Empathy and Compassion

November 22, 2013



Tania Singer is recognized as a world expert on empathy and compassion, and takes an interdisciplinary approach to study social and moral emotions such as fairness, envy, compassion, and revenge. In addition to brain imaging, her research methods include also game theoretical and psychological tasks, virtual reality environments and measuring biological markers such as the stress hormone cortisol. In a landmark 2004 study, she discovered that some of the same brain regions that are active when we feel pain also react to the knowledge that a loved one is being hurt. Those findings provided evidence that empathy on some level is an automatic, physiological response. Singer draws a distinction between empathy and compassion, defining the former as feeling someone else's emotional state and the latter as warm feeling of concern rooted in the desire to improve the wellbeing of another. She has looked at the negative effects of empathy, positing that too much empathetic suffering can lead to empathic distress, depression and even burnout. She is testing training methods aimed at helping people to shift their emotional reactions from empathy toward compassion and is now conducting a unique large-scale one-year longitudinal compassion training study, the ReSource project, to investigate the differential effects of different mental training techniques on plasticity of the social brain and behavior. She also edited a free downloadable multi-media E-book on Compassion (www.compassion-training.org).