

# The Science of Choosing Compassion

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## *Huffington Post:*

As I walk down bustling Franklin Street in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I often pass homeless people who ask me for spare change. Sometimes I let myself feel compassion for these individuals. But other times I don't want to get emotionally involved, so I look away and keep walking. Maybe you've had a similar experience. Pondering such experiences has led me to systematically explore the factors that influence when people feel compassion for others. The upshot of my research: You can choose to feel more compassion than you might think.

There are many cases when we don't feel compassion for others. Joseph Stalin reputedly said that a single victim is a tragedy, but a million victims is a statistic. And Mother Theresa said that if she looked at the mass of suffering people, she could not act to save them. Despite their differences, these two agree that it is difficult to feel compassion for many suffering victims. Psychological studies show that people feel more compassion for a single victim than for multiple victims, a finding that has been called "the collapse of compassion." The collapse of compassion should strike you as shocking. Most people predict that they would — and should — feel more compassion if more people are suffering. Yet people's emotional responses to actual victims tell otherwise. Imagine reading about either a single victim or eight victims. Experiments find that compassion doesn't simply level off with more victims — so it's not that adding seven victims to the single victim increases compassion only a little bit. Instead, adding seven victims makes you feel less compassion compared to just one. Compassion plummets as the numbers increase.

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