



IENE 6



Contemporary large migration waves into Europe: Enabling health workers to provide psychological support to migrants and refugees and develop strategies for dealing with their own emotional needs

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Bitesized Learning Tool No2: Culturally competent Compassion and Psychological Support

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Learning Objectives

- The first objective of this bitesized learning tool is to explore how compassion has been defined.
- The second objective is to introduce the reader to the Papadopoulos (2011) notion of **culturally competent compassion**.
- The third objective is to provide the components of culturally competent compassion which were identified by an international nursing study on compassion .
- Lastly, this bitesized learning tool raises awareness about the role of compassion in the delivery of psychological support to refugees.

What is compassion?

The word compassion originates from the Latin words 'com' (together with) and 'pati' (to suffer). The literature gives us various definitions of compassion:

1. Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas (2010) define compassion as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help...”
2. According to Simone Roach (2002), compassion is “as a way of living born out of an awareness of one’s relationship to all living creatures. It engenders a response of participation in the experience of another, a sensitivity to the pain and brokenness of the other and a quality of presence that allows one to share with and make room for the other”.
3. “Compassion means care given through relationships based on empathy, kindness, trust, respect and dignity, regardless of the circumstances and seeing the person behind the condition”(Cummings and Bennett, 2012).
4. According to Paul Gilbert, “compassion (which is an element of loving-kindness) involves being open to the suffering of self and others, in a non-defensive and non-judgemental way. Compassion also involves a desire to relieve suffering, cognitions related to understanding the causes of suffering, and behaviours- acting with compassion. Hence, it is from a combination of motives, emotions, thoughts and behaviours that compassion emerges”.

Compassion is distinct from the concepts of sympathy, empathy and caring because of compassion’s ‘intrinsic motion generated effect’ (Schantz, 2007): that is, the compassionate person recognises the suffering but also carries out some kind of action to reduce it.

A study by Papadopoulos et al. (2015) investigated how nurses in different countries define compassion and how they demonstrate it in their clinical practice. The data revealed a

number of components of compassion. The practice of compassion was described as a conscious and intentional act. The nurses described the following components of compassion:

- Time (e.g. spending time listening to the patient)
- Being there ('being with' the patient in mind, body and spirit)
- Going the extra mile (going beyond one's role)
- Defending and advocating (to challenge any injustices that may be occurring)
- Personalisation (considering the patient's individual characteristics)

Further to the findings of this study, Papadopoulos coined the term **culturally competent compassion**. She defined it as:

“a human quality of understanding the suffering of others and wanting to do something about it using culturally appropriate and acceptable nursing interventions which take into consideration both the patients' and the carers' cultural backgrounds as well as the context in which care is given”

(Papadopoulos, 2011; as cited in Papadopoulos & Pezzella, 2015, p. 2).

This is very relevant because noting the cultural background of the individual is very important when giving compassion.

The role of compassion in the delivery of psychological support

The definitions of compassion we have explored thus far involve both feelings (e.g. empathy, recognising) and behaviours (an action to relieve suffering).

Sometimes it may not be possible for us to solve a person's problems or relieve their suffering directly. Moreover, in the case of the refugees who are fleeing away from danger, it may take some time for their distress to reduce and for them to return to a normal level of functioning. Much of their distress may be understandably related to finding shelter, food for themselves and their children, or even worse, due to grieving the loss of family members or being separated from their children, or due to the horrendous experiences or even torture they may have suffered prior to or following their displacement. However, as healthcare professionals and volunteers in such situations we can act in compassionate ways, and give people strategies of managing their distress. This can help them to reduce their feelings of suffering or help to prevent it from getting worse. Moreover, health professionals and volunteers must provide compassion that is culturally appropriate because compassion is enacted and interpreted differently in different cultures. For example, a compassionate behaviour may be to hug somebody in distress but this may not be appropriate in all cultures.

Being compassionate while providing psychological support may include the following actions:

- **Giving the person time and a safe space** to speak to you and tell you about their problems or what is on their mind.
- **Listening in an active way** (sometimes just the act of listening can be very beneficial to a person who is distressed)
- **Acknowledging** and being aware that recalling traumatic events in itself can be distressing and evoke strong emotions
- **Being aware of the person's culture and individual characteristics**
- **Being non-judgemental** and non-critical whilst trying your best to advocate and find acceptable solutions
- **Letting the person show their emotions**; letting them know that being sad, angry, distressed and shocked are human ways of responding to traumatic and stressful life events and situations
- **Building a therapeutic relationship** with the person, which is based on respect, acceptance and a genuine desire to help.

Activities

1. From all the definitions of compassion we have provided above, which one do you prefer and why?
2. A refugee woman has arrived from Syria on a boat. She is carrying her baby who has died during the boat journey. The woman is in shock and very distressed. You are in a team of volunteers who is asked to help her.

How would you apply what you learn about culturally competent compassion (from the reading you have just done) to offer her psychological support in a compassionate way?

List the culturally competent and compassionate acts which you may take or the culturally compassionate things you might say to her.

Self assessment

How does the Papadopoulos (2011) definition of '**culturally competent compassion**' differ from the other definitions in this tool? Is it different because it includes (circle the correct answer):

- A) culturally appropriate and acceptable nursing interventions
- B) being non judgemental
- C) an awareness of one's relationship to all living creatures

Find the answer at the end of this tool.

Reflections: Use this space to write down your reflections about this topic and the above activities

References and useful resources

Goetz, J. L., Keltner, D., Simon-Thomas, E. (2010). Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136, 351-374.

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Simone Roach (2002). *Caring, the human mode of being: A blueprint for the health professions*. Canadian Hospital Association Press; 2nd edition.

Paul Gilbert (Ed.) (2005). *Compassion: Conceptualisations, Research, and Use in Psychotherapy*. Routledge, East Sussex.

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Papadopoulos et al (2017). Exploring Nurses' Meaning and Experiences of Compassion: An International Online survey involving 15 countries. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 28(3) 286-295.

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Self assessment answer: The correct answer is A