

# Compassionate Healthcare

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**H**ow do we define compassionate healthcare? Compassion means, “to suffer together.” Compassion is often defined as the feeling you get when you are confronted with others’ suffering and

feel motivated to alleviate or lessen that suffering.

In oncology, we often have long-term relationships with our patients and, therefore, when their cancer progresses or takes the patient’s life, we experience suffering. This emotion is on top of everything that goes on outside the clinic or hospital walls—like a global pandemic!

It is the nature of those who work in cancer care. We sit daily with our patients who are suffering, acknowledging the emotion and then trying to alleviate it in some way. Many times, being present, allowing the grief, and letting our patients know they aren’t alone is the only “treatment” we have.

So, what sustains us? How do we do this every day?

*Oncology Issues* recently interviewed Dr. Leigh Weiss, who has taught compassion courses at the Stanford School of Medicine, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights, and the Alzheimer’s Association, among others. On pages 52-56, Dr. Weiss shares her thoughts about a compassionate leadership model that I found thought-provoking.

One point that resonated with me was her call out to recognize opportunities to work on creating more compassionate interactions. To me, this type of mindfulness or attention is exactly what Dr. Victor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, author, and Holocaust survivor, is talking about in one of his most famous quotes.

*Between the stimulus and response there is a space.*

*In that space is our power to choose our response.*

*In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*

We can use this space for outward reflection and to help us find meaning in suffering. We can also use this space to choose compassion for ourselves when we have made a mistake or when we are experiencing challenges.

Self-compassion, as defined by Dr. Kristin Neff, an associate professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and author of the books *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* and *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power and Thrive*, is treating yourself with kindness and understanding, acknowledging your feelings in a non-judgmental way, and recognizing that everyone struggles sometimes.

I’d like to pause here and ask you to reflect on a question: How would it be to show the same compassion for yourself that you show for the people you care for daily at your cancer program or practice? And let’s not forget that the compassion—and care—we provide encompasses family members and many others who support patients with cancer.

Though this concept seems simple, in the context of our current reality—having to do more with fewer resources, a mass exodus of exhausted and burned-out cancer care team members from the healthcare workforce, ongoing racial inequity, and, yes, a global pandemic—compassion may sometimes be too much of a reach.

But it is a reach worth taking. We must continue to talk about race and what we can do to improve equity, inclusion, and diversity. We must continue to openly share our distress, exhaustion, and other difficult feelings. We must continue to do the best we can each day. But perhaps most importantly, we must continue to collaborate, listen to each other, and be understanding of our colleagues so that we can continue to show our patients and their loved ones the compassion and care our field is known for. 

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