



THE COMPASSION CODE

STARTER GUIDE

How to begin living *The Compassion Code* with Laura Jack

WELCOME, FRIEND!

Before we get started, I want you to know that the secret to compassion is that it is like any other skill, it can be taught and improved. While some people feel that it comes naturally and others feel like it is a foreign language, wherever you currently are in your journey, I am here to help you grow.

If it comes easily, I want to make sure you avoid burnout. If it feels hard, I want to give you the tools you need to get started.

I will share a combination of my best tools and resources to help you begin your journey to living and communicating with even more compassion in your life without burning yourself out.

WHAT IS COMPASSION?

Compassion is about finding the balance between sympathy—feeling for someone, and empathy—feeling with someone. It is as neuroscientist Max Planck says, “experiencing feelings of loving kindness toward another person’s affliction.”

Though related, compassion need not be mistaken for empathy. Compassion is about loving kindness for other people’s suffering, while “empathy refers to the ability to relate to another person’s pain vicariously, as if one has experienced that pain themselves.” Empathy alone can lead to burnout and disconnection.

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Compassion allows you to connect without falling into the depths of despair, which allows for a more supportive connection. If you tear up when someone is sharing their story with you, it can be a beautiful form of compassion. However, if someone's story has you cocooned on the floor sobbing, you can no longer support them. Both extremes can lead to disconnection.

As it relates to compassion, some people are natural caregivers who can feel taken advantage of, while others do whatever they want in the name of boundaries or putting their needs first. While neither is bad, each side would benefit from learning from the other.

Wherever you are, look at yourself with curiosity and compassion rather than judgment—and remember to find your center. The growth lies in seeing the spectrum and leaning more toward the places that stretch you.

COMPASSION STARTS WITH YOU

The first step to love and compassion is to relate kindly to ourselves. When we start there, even if it is just baby steps, we will be able to be more loving and compassionate toward others.

As human beings we are imperfect, and compassion for self is understanding and accepting that. We all deserve love, and we can only receive as much love from others as we give to ourselves. The more we nourish ourselves with compassion, the more ability we will have to share it with others.

I want to tell you a quick story.

A friend recently went through a breakup from a long-term relationship. After receiving pressure from family and friends to “get back out there,” she finally gave in. She went on a blind date and it seemed to be going well. But about half an hour into the date, he walked out on her without an explanation. She called her friend in tears and her friend said, “Of course he walked out. You’re overweight, unattractive, and have a ton of baggage.”

If you are gasping at the mean-natured response of her supposed friend, you're not alone.

Now, what if I told you those weren't her friend's words, but rather the things she told herself? While still awful, it might seem less appalling because self-criticism is something most people experience.

How could she have shown compassion toward herself and her date?

First, by relating kindly toward herself and acknowledging that the hurt she felt was natural. Second, by considering that he may have left for a completely different reason than what she thought, and likely it had nothing to do with her being inadequate. If she was being kind to herself, she may think, "I wonder what happened?" rather than, "What's wrong with me?"

COMPASSION IN ACTION

Relating kindly toward others starts with relating kindly toward yourself. Today, I invite you to take a baby step toward self-compassion. Next time you look in the mirror, give yourself a little smile and say some version of, "you are okay." If you feel like stepping it up a notch, give yourself a compliment. Try doing this at least once a day.

JOURNAL REFLECTION

Take a moment to write five things you like about yourself, some things you think are good about yourself, such as, "nice shoes," or "you're kind to people," etc.

TOOLS TO PUT YOUR COMPASSION INTO PRACTICE

Two of my most useful tools to put your compassion into practice are The Compassion Hat and Grief Colored Glasses. By utilizing these new tools, you will begin to connect with others in a way that promotes love, compassion, acceptance, unity, and understanding.

REMOVING JUDGEMENT AND TRYING ON THE COMPASSION HAT

First is your Compassion Hat.

The Compassion Hat is key because it allows you to “step out of yourself” and practice non-judgment. When you put on your Compassion Hat, you can begin to imagine what someone else’s story may be, aiding you in walking the proverbial mile in their shoes.

WHAT IS GRIEF? TRYING ON GRIEF COLORED GLASSES

The second is your Grief-Colored Glasses. You may be wondering, “what do Grief-Colored Glasses have to do with compassion?” These glasses are incredibly useful for understanding what influences people to act the way they do. The avoided, unresolved grief of the past is often what keeps people from being the best version of themselves.

As a Trainer for the Grief Recovery Institute®, I have learned that grief is not just how we feel when someone dies. The definition used at the Grief Recovery Institute® is, “the conflicting feelings caused by the end of, or change in, a familiar pattern of behavior.” This definition opens the grief experience to much more than death alone.

Death can certainly be a grieving experience, and yet there are many other losses we can experience in life. When things change, we experience grief. We feel relieved and we feel sadness. We feel fear and excitement. We feel emptiness and freedom.

Our Grief-Colored Glasses allow us to see beyond the façade of, “I’m fine,” and let us see what people aren’t telling us—the pain and unresolved grief that is not only normal but ever-present in every single human being. Whether you have experienced the death of someone you love, had your heartbroken, lost your dream job, had to put your childhood dog to sleep, or been diagnosed with cancer, we all walk around with our tales of grief.

By understanding that grief is everywhere because loss is part of the human experience, we can begin to grow our compassion muscles for both others and ourselves.

COMPASSION IN ACTION

Believe it or not, “How are you?” is one of the deepest, hardest questions you can ask someone. If you ask and truly want the answer, it can be scary for both you and them. When we ask hard questions, we need time, energy, and the capacity to listen to the answer (and ideally know how to respond). So often, we simply don’t ask.

An example from my life, one day after work I went over to a friend’s house for dinner. We were hanging out, listening to music, and chopping vegetables for dinner and I asked him, “How are you?” His mostly kidding response surprised me. He said, “Dammit, Laura, why do you always have to ask such hard questions?!”

The response of “I’m fine,” is what people say to avoid “getting emotional” or sharing something that someone “can’t handle.” And we’re afraid to ask people hard questions for fear that we won’t know how to respond. As grievers, we are afraid to answer because then we might be vulnerable.

If you know someone is going through a hard time, instead of asking, “How are you?” (because they are most likely not doing well), ask:

- “How is your day going?” (this recognizes that each day is different)
- “Has this been a good day or a challenging day?” (this allows them to be honest)
- “Have you done anything nice for yourself today?” (this is reinforcing self-care)
- “What’s going on for you today?”

As you learn what to say and how to ask, commit to doing so every chance you get.

Practice asking people how they are and waiting for the answer. If they share a story or a feeling that is a little more vulnerable than, “I’m fine,” or “I’m great,” you can practice saying some version of, “Thank you so much for sharing that with me.” Depending on the situation you can add, “I hope you feel better or that your day improves,” or “I’m sorry you have to go through that.”

JOURNAL REFLECTION

How are you? Write down some responses that may work for you in different settings: with a friend, at the grocery store, at a dinner party, etc. Practice them and feel what it feels like to say them out loud.

COMPASSION AS A PRACTICE

The interesting thing about compassion is that sometimes it has no words. There are a lot of “wrong” things to say to someone who is struggling, but there are very few helpful things we can say.

I wasn't born knowing what to say or do when people are suffering. On New Year's Eve of my senior year in college, I received the news that the mother of a good friend of mine from high school had died. I was stunned by the news and my reaction to hearing it, looking back, was a bit surprising.

I did nothing. I didn't call. I didn't go to the funeral. I didn't write.

One might consider that I was a terrible friend. How could I have done such a thing? The truth is, I justified it. I thought to myself, “I haven't talked to her in several years. She doesn't want to hear from me. I don't want to bother her. I don't know what I would say.”

At that point in my life, I considered myself a compassionate person. I deeply cared for people and loved my friend, but my response was anything but compassionate.

Why?

Because I was scared. I simply didn't know what to do or say, and I was deeply afraid to say the wrong thing.

While I had been through a few loss experiences myself, I had always been able to find a reason that it had worked out for the best, a silver lining. But I couldn't think of a silver lining this time, so I merely resorted to silence.

What I know now, and why I tell you this story, is that it was not about being compassionate or not, it was about not having the tools, understanding, or experience to best support my friend. For years, I was incredibly hard on myself for how I responded in that situation.

Now, I not only have compassion for myself and the way I responded, but I also have the privilege of sharing the many lessons I have learned along the way. Living the Compassion Code is still a daily practice for me.

SO, WHAT DOES COMPASSION SOUND LIKE?

First, we must reflect on and learn what Compassion does not sound like. Here are a few things not to say:

1. Don't say anything that makes sense in our head but feels bad to our heart.

For example, if I were to say, "I had a miscarriage," you would NOT say, "You are young, at least you can have another child." While this may or may not be true intellectually, it is painful to hear and certainly not helpful.

Other avoidances include:

- They are in a better place. (Nope, not to me they aren't.)
- You didn't have any children together. (How do you know I didn't want to?)
- You can find someone better. (What if I don't want to?)

*I want to add that anything following the words "at least" can diminish someone's feelings. Avoid using the words "at least" when responding to someone sharing their pain, challenge, trauma, or drama.

2. Avoid using platitudes or cliches. Don't say:

- Give it time.
- Stay busy.
- You'll find someone else.

- That job sucked anyway.
- Call me if you need me (This really becomes, go grieve alone.)
- You have got to be strong for _____ (Insert someone else here. Spouse, child, parent, sibling.) This just means “pretend to be fine for...”
- Pick yourself up by your bootstraps.
- Suck it up.
- It’s time to move on.
- You should be over it by now.

I am sure you have heard or perhaps said at least one if not all of these. They are NEVER helpful, and these little words are often the reason you haven’t heard from someone in a while. And remember, have compassion for yourself and others. You can’t do better until you know better.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

The best thing you can do is acknowledge and validate their feelings.

All of the comments in what not to say have one common theme: they are trying to fix the person. You don’t need to fix anyone. Rather, you can listen, hear, and validate them.

With compassion, tell the truth about yourself without making it about you. For example, sigh, touch your heart, and say, “That sucks,” or “I am so sorry you have to go through this.” **

If you have time to go deeper ask, “What happened?” When they tell you, your response can be, “I can’t imagine what that has been like for you.” Then give them silence and let them tell you. (They will!) Other suggestions include, “I wish it were different for you.” “My heart hurts for you.” “Thank you for sharing that with me.”

Gratitude is huge because it lets them know you are a safe place to open up. Situationally, you can ask questions that show love and care rather than judgment.

A more advanced technique that I teach from the Grief Recovery Institute® is phrasing feeling words as a question. I call it fishing. You are throwing a line out with a feeling

word with a clear question on the end. For example, do you see the difference between, “You must be sad,” and “Were you sad?”

When a feeling is asked like a question it gives the other person a chance to correct you. AND you don’t need to take it personally when or if they do, because it means that you were close but you are getting more clarity on how they actually feel.

You are fishing to find what is true for them. Try one-word fishing questions such as:

- “Frustrated?”
- “Mad?”
- “Relieved?”
- “Scared?”

This technique is most useful when they are telling you a factual story and you are trying to get to the feeling part. It is not necessary when they are sharing their feelings with you, but you can ask a clarifying question to get to the core of that feeling. You can also respond with, “Your feelings are totally valid,” or “While your experience is unique, you are not alone.”

If you want to share a personal experience that feels related you can ask, “May I share a personal experience that feels relevant?” If you are going to share, remember that it is about them in this moment, not you.

It is also incredibly important that you don’t compare. Another communication that kills compassion and connection is comparing.

One of my mentors says, “When we compare, we despair.” By comparing experiences you either diminish or isolate. It’s diminishing when you say, “At least you still have your other leg.” And you isolate others when you say, “Your loss is the worst and you will never recover.” Of course, you have good intentions to be positive or want them to feel like their loss is important, but you end up causing more harm than good.

You definitely don’t want to put people you love in a box that says you will NEVER be okay again. They may feel that way in this moment, but we don’t want to put that on them.

The truth is, humans are incredibly resilient and we can overcome anything with the right resources and mindset. But before anyone can recover, you have to acknowledge the pain.

** The tone of your voice does matter. Set the intention of curiosity, care, and concern.

ABOUT ME

Hello, my friend! My name is Laura Jack and I'm a Compassionate Communication Expert, Mastery Level Transformational Life Coach, Speaker, Trainer for the Grief Recovery Institute®, and Bestselling Author of *The Compassion Code: How To Say The Right Thing When The Wrong Thing Happens*.

My mission is to create a culture of compassion, starting with self, and I do this by teaching people how to relate to one another more effectively during challenging moments in life. I also provide in-depth communication and leadership training for those who want to create a culture of compassion both personally and professionally.



When I'm not working from my home office, you'll find me hanging with my husband and kids near our home in Austin, Texas, or bouncing around the world experiencing all that life has to offer.

If you would like further tools or want to bring me into your organization regarding, "How to say the right thing when the wrong thing happens", compassion without burnout, moving beyond the pain of loss, or creating meaningful connections in a relationship please visit [TheCompassionCodeAcademy.com](https://www.TheCompassionCodeAcademy.com).

All the best,

Laura J. Jack

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