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[See table of contents](#)

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THE ART AND SKILLS OF COMPASSION IN PRACTICE

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Empathy, or the ability to “feel” another person’s experience, evokes strong emotions and activates the neural pathways in the pain region of the brain. Compassion is empathy combined with purposeful action to relieve suffering and impacts the brain’s reward centres.

What are the outward impacts of compassion? Compassion is human connection, reciprocity, feeling cared for and caring for another. It reduces stress and cortisol for the receiver and giver. It reduces suffering and impacts all areas of the Quadruple Aim. Yet nearly half of the population of America and 63% of providers believe that the health system is not compassionate.

How do you build “compassion skills”? Being a compassionate clinician is not about knowledge, but the quality of communication and relational interactions. Many hold the belief that this ability is naturally acquired or inherent in medical practice, but this ability is technical, rooted in capabilities, intentional, and requires continuous practice and refinement. Healthcare practitioners are at a disadvantage: the rigorous clinical learning and the perceived time pressures of practice take precedent, limiting the opportunity for refinement and practice of these interpersonal communication skills.

Looking to bridge the gap on continuous professional development and learning from other sectors, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada has been considering approaches for practice improvement in compassion. To make compassion skills tangible, the presenters offered a “coaching skills” program for physicians. Early evidence is pointing towards the positive impacts of this type of communication skills training on the therapeutic alliance. ■