

**Syllabus**  
**Psychology 496H**  
**Fall semester, 2013**

Tuesday & Thursday, 11:00 am – 12:15 pm, Psychology Building, Rm. 317b

**Title:**           **The Psychology of Empathy and Compassion: Contemplative and Scientific Perspectives**

**Instructor:**   Alfred W. Kaszniak, Ph.D.  
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D2L Seminar site: [PSY496H FA13 001](#)  
Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday, 3:30 – 5:00 pm

**Seminar Description:**

This honors seminar will examine empathy and compassion from the perspectives of both contemplative traditions/practices and recent empirical research in social neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, affective science, and social psychology (including cultural psychology). In addition to readings and discussion, the seminar will involve relevant contemplative practice (e.g., breath-focused mindful attention, mindful listening, council circle, and reflective journaling). The guiding questions to be addressed in the seminar will include: (1) How have contemplative traditions and science historically viewed the nature of empathy and compassion? (2) How does research in social and cognitive neuroscience, affective science, and social psychology inform our understanding of empathy and compassion? (3) How do observational and neuroscientific studies of contemplative practitioners inform our understanding of the cultivation of compassion? (4) How do emotional and cognitive factors, such as fear, anger, aversion, desire, stereotyping, and our sense of self, affect the ability to manifest empathy and compassion? (5) How do factors such as health/illness, sleep, diet, exercise, and physical environment/architecture affect empathy and compassion? (6) How are empathy and compassion expressed or inhibited in various cultures? (7) What differences might exist in the world if more empathy and compassion were manifest?

**Seminar Requirements:**

- (1) Regular seminar session attendance: Any student missing six or more sessions will be considered to have not fulfilled requirements for course completion.
- (2) Completion of all assigned readings and a short reflective journal commentary (see below) on each reading, to be turned in by the beginning of the seminar session for which the reading is assigned.
- (3) Participation in seminar discussions and in-class exercises.
- (4) Completion of a final term paper (see below)
- (5) Adherence to all aspects of the UA Student Code of Conduct  
<<http://deanofstudents.arizona.edu/policiesandcodes/studentcodeofconduct>>

### **Grading:**

Grades for this seminar will be based on the following point computation procedure:

- (1) Seminar session attendance – (absent for no more than 1 session = 10 points; absent for no more than 2 sessions = 8 points; absent for no more than 3 sessions = 6 points; absent for no more than 4 sessions = 4 points; absent for 5 sessions = 0 points; absent for 6 or more sessions = course incomplete, regardless of completion of other seminar requirements)
- (2) Reflective journal commentary on each of the 38 assigned readings - (4 possible points for each acceptable (see below) journal commentary, for a total of 152 possible points)
- (3) Active participation in seminar discussions and in-class exercises – based on the student’s active engagement, and not on the “quality” of their discussion contributions or exercises - (10 possible points; The instructor will provide feedback at mid-semester, if there are concerns about a student’s participation)
- (4) Final term paper – (20 possible points for discussion of methodological strengths and weaknesses of the target research article; 20 possible points for discussion of the article’s relevance for the psychology of empathy and compassion (see below), for a possible total of 40 points)
- (5) Letter grade computation: A = 170 – 212 points; B= 150 – 169 points; C= 130 – 149 points; D= 110 – 129 points; E = less than 110 points

### **Reflective Journal Commentaries:**

Both prior to and following completion of each assigned reading, take ten minutes to practice the breath-focused mindful attention that you will have learned in class. Don’t actively think about the reading during this time, but rather, try to stay fully attentive to the breath. Don’t try to inhibit any bodily experience, sensory experience, thoughts, or feelings that may arise, but acknowledge these and each time gently return attention to the breath. After the initial breath-focused practice, allow this mindful attitude to maintain, being aware of and acknowledging any thoughts, images, or feelings that arise as you read, and gently returning your attention to the page. After the reading and your second breath-focused practice, while allowing the mindful attitude of the practice to ground your reflection, write *no more* than one page (single spaced, 12-point font) describing how the major points or conclusions of the reading relate to your own personal experience. There is no need to disclose private or confidential details of your experience, but be specific about how particular aspects of what you read are consistent or inconsistent with relevant aspects of your own day-to-day experience, and how what you read confirms, expands, modifies, or transforms the way you thought about the topic prior to the reading. Also describe anything you may have noticed about your experience during the reading (e.g., boredom, distraction, confusion, excitement, particular emotions), and whether, in retrospect, these experiences seemed to have any relationship to the content of the reading or context (e.g., the physical setting where you were reading, time of day, other experiences preceding your reading, etc.). Submit your reflective commentary to the course D2L site prior to the seminar session for which the reading is assigned.

### **Final Term Paper:**

This assignment requires you to carefully read and write in response to the following research report:

Farb, N.A.S., Segal, Z.V., Mayberg, H., Bean, J., McKeon, D., Fatima, Z, & Anderson, A.K. (2007). Attending to the present: mindfulness meditation reveals distinct neural modes of self-reference. *SCAN*, 2, 313-322.

In *no more than* 10 pages (12 point, double-spaced), describe what you think are the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the reported experiment. Also, describe how you think this research relates to the topic of empathy and compassion. As you will note, the experiment that is reported does not explicitly deal with empathy or compassion, but it does have relationship to some of the readings, exercises, and discussions of the seminar. Be specific about the particular readings and exercises to which you see this research as relevant, and how, although perhaps indirectly, this study might inform some aspect of our understanding of empathy and compassion. Grading of the paper will be based on both the degree to which you are able to address the requirements for this assignment, and the clarity of communication in your writing.

### **Seminar Session Topics and Reading Assignments:**

#### **8/27/13 Introduction and Seminar Overview**

(Introduction of instructor and students; review of syllabus and requirements; completion of pre-seminar questionnaires; general introduction to the rationale for considering contemplative traditions and utilizing contemplative practices within the seminar; discussion of a “non-dual” approach to this seminar; general seminar guidelines.)

#### **8/29/13 What is Mindful Attention, and Why is it Relevant?**

(In this session, we will introduce the practice of mindful breath attention, conduct a class exercise in mindful attention to sensory experience, and explore how this practice and exercise relate to today’s assigned readings.)

#### **Reading assignment:**

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Coming to our senses* (pp. 108-123). New York: Hyperion.  
Carlson, E.N. (2013). Overcoming the barriers to self-knowledge: Mindfulness as a path to seeing yourself as you really are. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8, 173-186.

#### **9/3/13 Mindful Attention and “Continuous Partial Attention”**

(In this session, we will expand on the practice of mindful breath attention, and discuss the contrasts between mindful attention and the typical quality of attention in our increasingly multitasking lives.)

#### **Reading assignment:**

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Coming to our senses* (pp. 143-161). New York: Hyperion.

9/5/13            **Contemplative Traditions and Scientific Psychology**

(In this session, we will introduce and engage in the contemplative practice of “council circle,” utilizing this as a vehicle to explore our experience of and reactions to today’s assigned readings.)

**Reading assignment:**

Kaszniak, A.W. (in press). Contemplative pedagogy: Perspectives from cognitive and affective science. In O. Gunnlaugson, H. Bai, E. Sarath, & C. Scott (Eds.), *Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines*. New York: State University of New York Press.

9/10/13            **Historical Perspectives on Compassion from Science and Contemplative Traditions**

(In this session, we will begin with a brief period of mindful breath attention, and explore, through presentation and discussion, the ways in which the human sciences and contemplative traditions have tended to view compassion.)

**Reading assignment:**

Harrington, A. (2002). A science of compassion or a compassionate science? In R.J. Davidson & A. Harrington (Eds.), *Visions of compassion* (pp. 18-30). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

H.H. The Dalai Lama (2002). Understanding our fundamental nature. In R.J. Davidson & A. Harrington (Eds.), *Visions of compassion* (pp. 66-80). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

9/12/13            **Altruism and Empathy in Evolutionary Perspective**

(In this session, we will view video clips of bonobo social interaction, and relate this in discussion to today’s reading. We will also introduce today the practice of brief periodic mindful breath attention at points during the session, observing any effect on our discussion.)

**Reading assignment:**

De Waal, F.B.M. (2008). Putting the altruism back in altruism: The evolution of empathy. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 59, 279-300.

9/17/13            **Altruism and Health**

(In this session we will utilize council circle to practice mindful listening to stories of personal experience related to today’s readings. In seminar discussion, we will also explore the nature and limitations of research relating altruistic behavior to health.)

**Reading assignment:**

Koenig, H.G. (2007). Altruistic love and physical health. In S.G. Post (Ed.), *Altruism and health: Perspectives from empirical research* (pp.422-441). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

9/19/13            **The Cultivation of Compassion in Contemplative Practice**

(In this session, we will discuss the relationship of contemplative practice to developing compassionate response to suffering, using today's readings as a foundation. We will also introduce a contemplative practice known as "loving-kindness meditation.")

**Reading Assignment:**

Halifax, J. (2008). *Being with dying: Cultivating compassion and fearlessness in the presence of death* (Chpts. 1 – 3; pp. 3-24). Boston: Shambhala.

Hutcherson, C.A., Seppala, E.M., & Gross, J.J. (2008). Loving-kindness meditation increases social connectedness. *Emotion*, 8, 720-724.

9/24/13            **Overview of the Social Cognitive Neuroscience of Empathy**

(In this session, we will begin with a brief period of mindful breath attention, and explore, through presentation and discussion, the neuroscientific model of human empathy described in today's reading.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Decety, J. (2007). A social cognitive neuroscience model of human empathy. In E. Harmon-Jones & P. Winkielman (Eds.), *Social neuroscience: Integrating biological and psychological explanations of social behavior* (pp. 246-270). New York: Guilford Press.

9/26/13            **The Discovery of Mirror Neurons**

(In this session, we will begin with a brief period of mindful breath attention, and then discuss the discovery and interpretation of mirror neurons in primate brain, as described in today's reading. We will also again utilize the practice of brief periodic mindful breath attention at points during the session, observing any effect on our discussion.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Iacoboni, M. (2008). *Mirroring people: The new science of how we connect with others* (Chpt. 1; pp. 3-46). New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

10/1/13            **Mirror Neurons and Human Empathy**

(In this session, we will begin with discussion of how the discovery of mirror neurons relates to human empathy, emphasizing the role of human functional magnetic imaging (fMRI) research in the exploration of this relationship, as described in today's reading. We will also introduce a dyadic exercise for practicing nonjudgmental presence to another's suffering.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Iacoboni, M. (2008). *Mirroring people: The new science of how we connect with others* (Chpt. 4; pp. 106-129). New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

10/3/13      **Neural Correlates of Empathy for Pain**

(In this session, we will begin with a brief period of mindful breath attention, and then discuss the experiment described in today's readings. We will also again utilize the practice of brief periodic mindful breath attention at points during the session, observing any effect on our discussion.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Lamm, C., Batson, C.D., & Decety, J. (2007). The neural substrate of human empathy: Effects of perspective-taking and cognitive appraisal. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, 19*, 42-58.

Singer, T., Seymore, B., O'Doherty, J.P., Stephan, K.E., Dolan, R.J., & Frith, C.D. (2006). Empathic neural responses are modulated by the perceived fairness of others. *Nature, 439*, 466-469.

10/8/13      **The Insular Cortex and Empathy for Other's Emotions**

(For today, we will not meet as a group in our regular seminar session, but will rather individually engage in an exercise designed to help you integrate today's reading with your own first-person experience of empathy. For this exercise, you will need to go to the class D2L website where you will find instructions for the reflective viewing of film clips posted there. The website will also guide you in questions you will address following each film clip viewing.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Rizzolatti, G., & Sinigaglia, C. (2008). *Mirrors in the brain: How our minds share actions and emotions* (Chapter 7, pp. 173-193). Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.

10/10/13      **"Interbeing"/Interdependence: Contemplative Perspectives**

(In this session, we will begin with a brief period of mindful breath attention, followed by discussion of today's readings.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Loy, D. (2008). Rethinking karma: How are we meant to understand this key Buddhist teaching? *Tricycle, 17* (3), 81-85.

Hanh, T.N. (1988). Please call me by my true names. In F. Eppsteiner (Ed.), *The path of compassion* (pp. 31-39). Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.

10/15/13      **Empathy Development in Childhood**

(In this session, we will begin with brief mindful breath attention, followed by discussion of the reading and integration with the previously presented neuroscience model of human empathy.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Widen, S.C., & Russell, J.A. (2008). Young children's understanding of others' emotions. In M. Lewis, J.M. Haviland-Jones, & L. Feldman Barrett (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 348-363). New York: Guilford Press.

10/17/13      **Development, Attachment Security, and Compassion**

(In this session, we will discuss today's reading, focusing on how research concerning the role of attachment security in child development is relevant for an understanding of compassion and altruism. We will also utilize the practice of brief periodic mindful breath attention at points during the session, observing any effect on our discussion.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P.R. (2005). Attachment security, compassion, and altruism. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 14*, 34-38.

10/22/13      **Contemplative & Scientific Perspectives on the Nature of Self**

(In this session, we will begin with a brief period of mindful breath attention, and explore, through presentation and discussion, issues involving our understanding of self.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Dambrun, M., & Ricard, M. (2011). Self-centeredness and selflessness: A theory of self-based psychological functioning and its consequences for happiness. *Review of General Psychology, 15*, 138-157.

10/29/13      **Contemplative Perspectives on Hindrances to Kindness & Compassion**

(In this session, we will explore, in discussion, a perspective from contemplative practice on factors that hinder the expression of kindness and compassion. This discussion will be facilitated through watching a relevant clip from the Richard Attenborough film, "Gandhi" focusing on how the instructions Gandhi gives to a very distraught individual relate to today's readings and discussion.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Salzberg, S. (1995). *Loving-kindness: The revolutionary art of happiness* (Chpts. 4 & 5, pp. 48-82). Boston, MA: Shambhala.

10/31/13      **Attitudes, Prejudice, and Intergroup Failures of Empathy**

(In this session, we will examine recent neuroscientific research on intergroup failures of empathy, as reviewed in today's reading. We will also utilize a brief clip from the Randa Haines film, "Children of a Lesser God" to stimulate council circle reflections on the relationship of our own ability to empathize with those who are different.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Cikara, M., Bruneau, E.G., & Saxe, R.R. (2011). Us and them: Intergroup failures of empathy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 20*, 149-153.

11/5/13      **"Egocentricity" and Difficulty Adopting the Perspective of the Other**

(In this session, we will discuss research, described in today's reading, suggesting that errors in taking the perspective of others reflects difficulty in disengaging from one's

own self-perspective and shifting to the perspective of the other. We will also utilize the previously introduced dyadic exercise for practicing nonjudgmental presence, examining how this affects our perspective.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Royzman, E.B., Cassidy, K.W., & Baron, J. (2003). I know you know: Epistemic egocentrism in children and adults. *Review of General Psychology*, 7, 38-65.

11/7/13            **Perspective Taking and Empathy**

(In this session, presentation and discussion will focus upon the contribution of social psychological and neuroimaging research to our understanding of the impact of perspective taking on empathic response, as exemplified by today's readings. During the discussion, we will engage in a contemplative practice designed to illustrate the first-person experience of perspective shifting.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Batson, C.D., Early, S., & Salvarani, G. (1997). Perspective taking: Imagining how another feels versus imagining how you would feel. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, 751-758.

Cheng, Y., Lin, C.-P., Liu, H.-L., Hsu, Y.-Y., Lim, K.-E., Hung, D., & Decety, J. (2007). Expertise modulates the perception of pain in others. *Current Biology*, 17, 1708-1713.

11/12/13            **Meditation, Attention, and Perspective Shifting**

(In this session, we will begin with a brief period of mindful breath attention, setting the stage for presentation and discussion of research concerning the impact of meditation training on attention, as described in today's readings.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Lutz, A., Slagter, H.A., Dunne, J., & Davidson, R.J. (2008). Attention regulation and monitoring in meditation. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12, 163-169.

Slagter, H.A., Lutz, A., Greischar, L.L., Francis, A. Nieuwenhuis, S., Davis, J.M., & Davidson, R.J. (2007). Mental training affects distribution of limited brain resources. *PLoS Biology*, 5 (6), e138. Doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.0050138.

11/14/13            **Emotional Arousal, Empathy, and Altruism**

(In this session, we will begin with a mindfulness exercise focusing attention on bodily experience. This will provide a first-person context for discussion of research on the arousal of emotion in empathy and empathic distress, as described in today's reading.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Eisenberg, N. (2002). Empathy-related emotional responses, altruism, and their socialization. In R.J. Davidson & A. Harrington (Eds.), *Visions of compassion* (pp. 131-164). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

11/19/13            **Emotion Regulation and Stress**

(In this session, presentation and discussion will examine the concept of emotion regulation and its relevance to empathy and compassion. We will also discuss the reciprocal relationships of physiological and psychological stress and emotion regulation. During discussion, we will again utilize the practice of brief periodic mindful breath attention at points during the session, observing any effect on our discussion.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Gross, J.J., & Thompson, R.A. (2007). Emotion regulation: conceptual foundations. In J.J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 3-24). New York: Guilford Press.

Sapolsky, R.M. (2007). Stress, stress-related disease, and emotional regulation. In J.J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 606-615). New York: Guilford Press.

11/21/13      **Mindfulness, Meditation, and Emotion Regulation**

(In this session, we will again begin with a mindfulness exercise focusing attention on bodily experience, expanding the exercise to attention on bodily experience of emotional arousal. We will utilize what arises for us in this exercise to help guide presentation and discussion of today's readings.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Ortner, C. N. M., Kilner, S. J., & Zelazo, P. D. (2007). Mindfulness meditation and reduced emotional interference on a cognitive task. *Motivation and Emotion*, 31, 271–283

Lutz, A., Brefczynski-Lewis, J., Johnstone, T., & Davidson, R.J. (2008). Regulation of the neural circuitry of emotion by compassion meditation: Effects of meditative expertise. *PLoS ONE*, 3(3), e1897. Doi:10.1371/journal.pone.00011897.

11/26/13      **“Selfless Compassion” and “Not Knowing”**

(In this session, we will explore the contemplative tradition concepts of selfless compassion and not knowing, and recent relevant neuroscientific research. We will also utilize the previously introduced dyadic exercise for practicing nonjudgmental presence to another's suffering)

**Reading Assignment:**

Halifax, J. (2008). *Being with dying: Cultivating compassion and fearlessness in the presence of death* (Chpt. 4; pp. 25-35). Boston: Shambhala.

Pagnoni, G., Cekic, M., & Guo, Y. (2008). “Thinking about not-thinking”: Neural correlates of conceptual processing during Zen meditation. *PLoS ONE* 3 (9): e3083. Doc10.1371/journal\_pone.00-3083

11/28/13      **Thanksgiving Break: No class Session**

12/3/13      **Cultural Differences and Self: Implications for Empathy & Compassion**

(In this session we will utilize an interactive game to help illustrate some of the issues raised in today's reading. Subsequent discussion will examine implications for empathy and compassion.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Nisbett, R.E. (2003). *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently...and why* (Chpt. 3, pp. 47-77). New York: Free Press.

12/5/13            **Culture and Emotion Regulation**

(In this session, we will begin with a brief period of mindful breath attention, followed by discussion of research on culture and emotion regulation, as reviewed in today's readings. Discussion will also explore how cultural differences in emotion regulation relate to the expression and inhibition of empathy and compassion.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Mesquita, B., & Albert, D. (2007). The cultural regulation of emotions. In J.J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 486-503). New York: Guilford Press.

12/10/13           **Can Compassion be Trained and Measured?**

(We will begin with a brief period of mindful attention to our sensory and bodily experience. We will then move to discussion of recent efforts at training compassion and measuring the consequences of such training.)

**Reading Assignment:**

Weng, H.Y., Fox, A.S., Shackman, A.J., Stodola, D.E., Caldwell, J.Z.K., Olson, M.C., Rogers, G.M., & Richard J. Davidson, R.J. (2013). Compassion training alters altruism and neural responses to suffering. *Psychological Science*, DOI: 10.1177/0956797612469537

Leiberg, S., Klimecki, O., & Singer, T. (2011). Short-term compassion training increases prosocial behavior in a newly developed prosocial game. *PLoS ONE*, 6(3). e17798. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0017798.

12/17/13           **Final Term Papers Due**