



Nat Damon: Welcome to another episode of Reach, Teach, Talk. I am excited today because my guest is Jimi Slattery, who is the head of Compassion Matters, which is an organization based in Oxford here in the UK. He's going to talk with us today about the importance of compassion, particularly with the youngest generation. In other words, the students that we are teaching here and now today.

Nat Damon: I've just got to be honest, Jimi, I'm actually exhausted right now. I just got back from three weeks of work in the US and I'm jet lagged. I find the older I get the more sensitive I am to jet lag. So I've been mainlining the coffee a bit, which I don't drink much coffee in my regular life, but I definitely am drinking more today just to make it through. But also, just I'm noticing the effect the fatigue has on my temper, my mood. I promise I'll play well today with you, but honestly like I'm just feeling the effects of fatigue on my overall mood.

Nat Damon: I'm thinking about how I noticed even today, I'm talking more curtly with people. I'm not noticing the people around me as much because I'm just focused on getting through the day, and I'm also just feeling tired. It was apt because we're talking today about compassion. And as an educator myself, I think about the importance of being rested and the importance of time to self care. In other words, to take care of myself as a teacher, to take care of myself so that then I can be of best service to my students. And being of best service to my students really means being as compassionate as I can be. Understanding that there's 25 individuals right there in the classroom sharing the space with me, all with different learning abilities, all different personalities, all different just colors, fabric, right? That make up the quilt of the classroom. But really, I found that for me to best connect with them, I needed to connect with myself, and practice self-compassion so that I could therefore practice compassion toward them.

Nat Damon: So having you here today, when I'm in this low on the fuel gauge mindset is really perfect, because you're here to talk to me today about the importance of compassion and just share with our viewers and our listeners why compassion is important as a skill to be learned. I'll let you phrase it however you wish, but why it's so important for the youngest ones today to be quite versed in the importance of compassion, what compassion is, the definition of compassion, and obviously the practice of it. In other words, why compassion matters, which coincidentally is the name of your organization, Compassion Matters. So, Jimi, I'll have you take it away from that.

Jimi Slattery: Well, I don't think you should be too hard on yourself because you're noticing, for one, and you're being mindful about the fact and your mood, which I think is a really great thing. So you're being considerate on yourself anyway and your actions towards others, which is really important. I think the real danger is when we're really blinkered and our emotions overtake our ability to notice where we are and what we're feeling like and how we're acting. That's the space where you begin to act in a sometimes quite harmful way towards yourself and others emotionally. So you shouldn't be so hard on yourself.

Nat Damon: Thank you. I accept your forgiveness. But you're right. The idea of being blinded by emotion, right? Typically blinded by rage, blinded by anger, blinded by one's temper. That's what you're referring to?

Jimi Slattery: Yeah, I think in the classroom, bringing it back to education, the classroom is a space where that happens a lot because as you've just described, it's a space with so many people with so many different moods who are on different levels and who are trying to negotiate their way through just that time, maybe about 45 minutes, an hour. And then there's you, the teacher, at the front trying to keep those plates spinning and keep everyone on course. It's an incredible dynamic. There's a lot going on emotionally in that room. And so for me, I think a focus on compassion a lot of the time is about, as well as being kind to ourselves, taking ourselves out and thinking about others.

Jimi Slattery: That can be a real way of leveling that dynamic. Because if you're thinking about others on equal footing or sometimes more than yourself, you begin to see a dynamic which is slightly more steady I suppose. I think in the classrooms I've seen where this has been really taken on board, there seems to be a peacefulness, a social cohesion, and a steadiness, I suppose. It just creates a space for learning which is more productive. It allows people to flourish in that environment more, which is why I'm interested in this actually.

Jimi Slattery: You know, I think the world should be a more compassionate place generally. I think we're in a time in our modern society where compassion is lacking. The amazing thing about my job is people do come up to me and they go, "Yeah, compassion does matter and we need more of it." What I do is an easy pitch, but when you start to pick away at it, it has some really quite incredible consequences when we lack compassion, we lack engagement with other people we lack respect for ourselves. That has all sorts of knock on effects at both the micro and the macro level, the macro level often being political, and on the micro level our wellbeing, being tested and sometimes negatively impacted.

Nat Damon: You said something interesting earlier about how a lack of compassion, when somebody is feeling lack of compassion, they are actually feeling, what was the word you said about themselves? Angry about themselves or there's a connection to a negativity in oneself?

Jimi Slattery: Yeah, my colleague Alex, he said you use the phrase self-compassion. He's an ethicist, and he would say that that's wrong because compassion is actually about recognizing suffering in others and then taking action. But I'm not as much as of a pedant as Alex, so I think self-compassion is fine. I think it's a lovely

term actually. I think it recognizes that we need to take care of ourselves as well as others. Actually, we can only begin to take care of others if we're in a place of safety, in a place where we're feeling content, and we've got everything set up on our side. That's the only way we can begin to make a positive impact on others. The funny thing is it's quite cyclical. So when you begin to engage others in compassion, your outward compassion, your inward happiness is impacted by that, and all of those positive things internally start to be impacted.

Jimi Slattery: I suppose that's one of the really key things of our project is that we're trying to show children and teachers that by looking outwards to others, and by being of service to others, and by thinking about others in a deeper way, we can begin to form happiness in ourselves. Service is not just about having a short term gratification for doing something good. There's lots of things that have been proven scientifically going on in our minds which bring positiveness into our lives, and happiness and flourishing into our lives through engaging with others in a positive way and trying to alleviate their suffering, and then has a knock on effect on wider society, each of those tiny interactions, each of those tiny efforts to alleviate suffering and others. It's good for us, but it's also good for the little connections, and that person going out and doing it and then another person going out and doing it. Yeah, it's powerful.

Nat Damon: I'm thinking about how powerful it's been for me. I've lived in London for four years, and over the past four years among other things, the UK has taken a real focus on mental health, and particularly among men. There's been football players who have talked about how important it is to actually loosen up your upper lip and to talk because traditionally men don't talk. Right? And this idea of connection versus this idea of being alone, to wallow alone, to think you can work through your problems on your own is really quite an impossible, a foolish errand. Right? Because it really does, science proves that this exchange of communication is really helpful toward one's own mental health. Right? Mental stability. I'm bringing that up because what you said earlier about the act of giving towards others as a compassionate act, as something that actually can be very healing for the person doing the giving. Maybe you could dive a little deeper into that, and then I'm going to ask another question that deals with the classroom and how that applies to the classroom.

Jimi Slattery: Yeah. So I can't cite anyone, but the research around the way that compassionate action can influence both our mental state and actually our physical state has been rapidly evolving over the last 10 years. And getting to a point now where we're seeing the type of scientific evidence that shows not just increasing levels of prosocial behavior through engaging in compassionate activity, but also a changing of your brain, of the neuroscience of your brain through compassion. So the thing I always find with compassion is people see it as quite finite. They're like, "Oh, you know, I'm just not a very compassionate person, or I am a very compassionate person."

Jimi Slattery: Yeah, and it's not. It's a learned thing. It's a practiced thing. So a bit something like mindfulness, which is all about training your mind to be better at being in the moment and the benefits that come from that. Compassion is very, very similar. You can train your mind to become more compassionate and therefore

your brain can grow in the parts that are adept for compassion and for prosocial behavior and emotional regulation, and for developing deeper connections with people. All of those things can be developed. So anyone who's kind of feeling like, "Oh, I'm a kind of shy person, or I'm not very good at engaging with people in that way, or it's just not my natural tendency." No. There is an opportunity there to learn this. That's, I suppose, where it comes into the classroom, is that we have this opportunity to offer this training to children.

Jimi Slattery: This type of research started, I think 20 years ago, at Stanford where they started compassion. They have a program now called Compassion Cultivation Training and it was started in the medical school. The idea was that lots of medical staff are amazingly trained at this fantastic, Ivy League university but many of them were lacking compassion for the people they were treating because of the nature, especially of some elements of medical practice, meant that detachment was required for them to be able to undertake that work, such as being a surgeon or doing emergency work. You have to practice on the job at hand.

Jimi Slattery: But actually for some practitioners being compassionate is really important and there was an element missing. Many people get into this type of work because they are motivated by altruism. Then if you take the compassionate part away, there's a real dissonance between what they're hoping to achieve in their career. So there's the self-satisfaction issue, and then there's also a patient care issue. So this work was undertaken and it was found through this Compassion Cultivation Training that they could work with medical students, and actually pre and post testing showed that they could improve their disposition and compassionate skills and the impact in the near term in their ability to be compassionate and their disposition to be compassionate to others, which is incredible.

Jimi Slattery: It's really over the last three or four years that several groups around the world have started to put this into an educational context, including us, in various lenses. So for instance, there's a Compassion In Schools which is based on compassion focused therapy, which is another movement in this country. There's SE learning, which is based in Atlanta, in Georgia, in the US.

Nat Damon: It that social-emotional learning?

Jimi Slattery: Yeah.

Nat Damon: It's very, very big in the States.

Jimi Slattery: Yeah, exactly. You've had those programs for years and they've developed a program specifically around compassion and ethics, similar to what we do here, and we work in partnership with them. Then we have what we're doing again, which is taking lots of the principles of SEL, which is a fantastic program to have so widespread and have an in-depth evidence base for. We just don't have that in this country.

Jimi Slattery: The time, I suppose, for me it's very right for us to begin to address this because I think we're beginning to put some fantastic things in place, like having conversations about male suicide rates, raising awareness with children of various mental challenges they might come across in their life. And also we have some fantastic people offering really targeted services to children who are vulnerable in this country, although really not enough that are publicly available. But what is missing is the type of SEL, social-emotional learning education opportunity, which is available in the US, and that's something that's universal and foundational.

Jimi Slattery: So it's not just having these targeted service, not just having an awareness raising, but having an opportunity for children to explore and develop emotional literacy and emotional skills at a really early point in their education, and that to be carried on through so they've got continued practice. Compassion definitely has a role to play in that. I always think of it like a pyramid. If you've got that at the bottom of the pyramid, you'll move through life. But if you've got those foundational skills there, maybe awareness is the next. And then you might reach a point in your life where you need that targeted intervention. You might need to see a counselor, or you might need to do some cognitive behavioral therapy, or you might need to go and seek psychiatric care.

Jimi Slattery: But if you look back and you've got that foundation there, you're going to be in a much better position when you're facing your challenges or you've reached that stage because you've persisted and your school hopefully has persisted with you undertaking that type of education.

Nat Damon: You were talking about the importance of laying the foundations so that all students can have this foundation of security and stability when that inevitable wave hits them. I'll also give another example from back when I was a deputy head, which was I would have these technology companies knocking on my door saying, "Hey, we've got this great technological program to help increase the collaboration, the communication, to help make your students connect closer with each other in your primary school classroom." In the back of my head I would always think to myself, "But why do I need that?" Why spend money on a technology when really these are the primary years and what's most important is getting these kids to learn how to relate to each other on a very human to human level. So both those examples I was thinking about as you were speaking about the importance of laying this foundation of building compassion.

Nat Damon: I want to get back to your definition of compassion because I think about the word empathy a lot when I think about the word compassion. Okay? I think about empathy as stepping into somebody else's shoes. It's Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* saying, "You can't know what it's like to be somebody until you step into their shoes. You walk around in them a little bit." Yet your definition of compassion is the idea of being open and feeling the hardship of another person. So would you agree that the definition, the nuance between being compassionate and being empathetic, is that?

Jimi Slattery: Yeah, definitely. They're very distinct things. And again, my colleague Alex, he's an ethicist so he'd be able to offer you a laser sharp definition. But my

understanding and my exploration of compassion is that you don't have to step into someone else's shoes, because naturally as a human being, if you see someone else suffering, you feel it. You don't have to go through that process. It's there in front of you. But there are lots of other things that underpin compassion as well, and I think empathy plays a role. Things like justice, like a feeling of wanting to make something better which is wrong. That is fundamental for compassion. Like courage.

Jimi Slattery: I was speaking to teachers the other week. I was chatting to someone from the States, a doctor there who's worked in compassion for years and he thinks courage is the key component in compassion, the most important part. Because unless you are willing to take the action, your compassion is wasted just feeling sorry for someone. You're looking at their suffering and going, "That's really, really sad." But unless you take the step, and having the courage sometimes to step outside the social norm.

Jimi Slattery: Again taking that back to the classroom, how difficult within the structures and the systems of our education sector, is it sometimes to step outside the norm? You might see a child or another teacher suffering. It might be something really major and profound, or it might be something quite minor, but that has repercussions. But going, "No, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to make sure that person's okay." Or "I'm going to stop this." My goodness. That is a profound thing to do that.

Nat Damon: The word courage, the root of it is heart, strength. Courage is the heart strength. So it fits so much because it's not just as you said, "Oh this person, I feel sad for this person." It's, "I'm going to lean forward. I'm going to break this fourth wall and very possibly connect with this person." Right? Is that the difference?

Jimi Slattery: My colleague Brendan would say compassionate is fierce, which I love.

Nat Damon: I do too. I do too.

Jimi Slattery: I love that, because it requires you sometimes ... The thing I often find with compassion is that people think it's about kindness, and kindness is a wonderful thing. Like I came in here and someone made me a cup of tea, which was extremely kind, and I'm very much appreciate that. It's very cold outside. I've walked 20 minutes to get here. I was freezing. So a cup of tea is [inaudible 00:19:29].

Nat Damon: In a lovely mug too.

Jimi Slattery: But kindness alone isn't enough. I think there's a depth that comes from compassion, and courage is part of that. An sometimes that courage has to be fierce. You have to put something else aside or put or really push back on someone and that can be difficult to judge, and emotional, but really, really important. Because if you think of some of the people who've been most inspiring in society, they're people who've had that compassion but been willing to be fierce about it, even sometimes in a passive way, if you know what I mean.

So someone like Nelson Mandela who was a fierce advocate for what he was wanting to do in his life, but at the same time he showed that fierceness in a compassionate way, in a way that was him sticking to his guns and being resolute. That was how he made his fierceness shown. That was, I think, amazing.

Nat Damon: I love that. I love that so much. This great example of Nelson Mandela. Bringing it back to the classroom, what's one thing or what's a piece of advice if you were to be able to negotiate with Ofsted, which is basically the Department of Education over here in the UK and say, "Look, every teacher needs the ability in the classroom to do X in order to create an ethos of compassion." Think for a second. What do you think that ingredient, that essential ingredient, is so that teachers can be fiercely compassionate and model fierce compassion for their students?

Jimi Slattery: Yeah, I think I'd probably bring it back to something that I brought up earlier, which is a dissonance between why teachers go into teaching and what they face in the classroom.

Nat Damon: It's just more of that dissonance.

Jimi Slattery: Yeah. So there's a huge problem in the UK with a high percentage teachers dropping out before their third year is complete. And often it's put down to stress. But stress, that's the end product. Unpack where that comes from, and a lot of the time it's down to teachers who have got into this job for very altruistic reasons. It might not be their prime reason but often a passion reason underneath is that they want to be able to influence children's lives, and to be able to educate children and have a positive effect on their future. I think that's why 99% of teachers teach. And when they get into the classroom, they can't attend to that because there's lots of other things going on. This is a problem which is beginning to be addressed in this country. So lots of bureaucracy. There are attempts to move a burden of bureaucracy off of teachers at the moment.

Jimi Slattery: But for me, what I would say is just taking the time, giving teachers the time, or teachers creating the time. And I'm seeing more and more fantastic, courageous, revolutionary teachers out there who are taking time in their day to have a moment of reflection with their class, or to they might get a phrase or an image, or they might have an idea, or reading from a book. And they're just taking that time.

Jimi Slattery: I had the example in a classroom the other day where a teacher was telling me that she got really fed up with the fact that they did lots of fundraising. I said, "But fundraising's a really nice thing to do." She said, "But the children don't know what it's for. They think they just bring a pound in and wear their jeans for the day." So when they do that now she spends 20 minutes really going in depth with the children about what they are raising funds for. And they respond. Huge amounts of money for lots of really wonderful causes. The children have the opportunity to explore compassion there, and the reason that they're doing this, it's not just so that they can wear their cool new tee shirts for the day. It's

so that they can use some of that privilege and wealth to bring positive change to other people. It's that kind of thing.

Jimi Slattery: Another example was I worked with a wonderful school in Durham, in the Northeast of England, and they initiated off the back of our compassion project a peer program in their school. They work with their year sixes. In the UK that's 10, 11 year olds, and they're getting to the serious end of education. They were a bit worried about them being over-pressured by exams and the more formalized nature of their education. So they set up a peer program where they actually look after, for two or three hours a week, they go into the lowest level of the school to reception with four, five year olds. They spend time with them. They read with them. They take themselves out of formalized learning for a bit of time. And yeah, they cultivate compassion. They go there and they help them do things. When they come into the school as new students, they show them around and they buddy up to them. The teachers have a really great program with examples of activities they can do together. So it's supportive, a great idea.

Jimi Slattery: I think there's so much opportunity especially at primary level, and there are many schools who have wonderful projects like that in their school that can make space for reflection and for practicing compassion, or understanding it and greater depth, or any kind of emotional learning in depth. I think taking the time to do that would be really, really exciting and could make a huge difference to children's lives.

Nat Damon: I love that. I love the example of the primary school, the buddy system or the buddy mentoring program because the older kids in a primary school have already been there. They innately understand what it's like to be a student who's in reception, which in the US would be pre-K, pre-kindergarten, four and five years old. They would naturally draw themselves to help those kids, because they've been there. They know this. So any of these older primary students can do this and feel like they're contributing to the ethos of the school, the positive school culture. Right?

Nat Damon: All this discussion about compassion reminds me that I really wanted you to share an anecdote that you shared with us when I met you at this seminar. You gave a keynote speech about your work with Compassion Matters. You started with this story about an archeological discovery. I think this is a really great way, actually, to reiterate the importance, but also the timelessness of the value of compassion.

Jimi Slattery: Yeah. Yeah. So I was in archeology undergraduate. I chose archeology because I think my dad wasn't quite so scared about me going to university to study archeology because it's a slightly more practical thing than going and doing something like art history, which he couldn't get his head around. So it was an acceptable thing for all of us. So you I'd be digging some holes and stuff as well-

Nat Damon: It's very appropriate that we're three blocks away or so from the British Museum too, the largest collection of artifacts.



Jimi Slattery: It was multidisciplinary and I found it fascinating. But it was also at the time becoming more a scientific subject, and archeology traditionally was a kind of cultural history. So it'd be about the richness of the narrative of human civilization I suppose. But it was beginning to draw away from that a bit. That was quite disappointing for me, but I found little stories within my studies that I found really inspiring.

Jimi Slattery: One of them, which you allude to, is about a dig that happened in Northern Thailand where they discovered the body of a gentleman who is quite profoundly disabled, physically disabled. He had a syndrome which meant that by the age of 14 he would have lost the use of basically his legs, and probably half of his upper body as well. The date of this site was middle to late prehistory, which we're talking about hunter-gatherer people. So people who transitioning into farming and things like that. The considered thinking, especially when we're thinking of Darwinism and survival of the fittest and things like that, is that this person would have been left behind. You know, you're a burden on the community.

Jimi Slattery: But actually this site and hundreds of sites in the emerging area uncovering disability and diversity within the archeological record, is that there's lots and lots of sites where not only is there evidence of people with various disabilities living beyond their life expectancy for that time, but also really flourishing. And also when they did die being really valued and buried in a way that showed they were highly valued members of the community.

Jimi Slattery: For me that is a demonstration of compassion in its very purest form because that community, if we're talking very functionally, didn't have to look after that person. The input-output costs of looking after that person in a purely, "Oh, who makes food, who produces food" type of way, which is how we think about pre history. That person shouldn't have been looked after, but people were looking after them.

Jimi Slattery: For me, compassion is the very, very core of that story because it's about connection. It's about feeling towards other people, of seeing that suffering, and instead of saying, "No. You've got no role to play," engaging with that person, lessening their suffering, ensuring they're a valued and engaged member of the community. For me that was extremely powerful. It really actually played a profound role in me probably engaging in my studies in a deeper way and enjoying my studies a lot more. Because I thought, "Wow, this isn't just about potshard number 58 in this site," or all this isotopic analysis. This is about people and the human journey and the positive potential.

Jimi Slattery: I think a lot in history as well, in archeology, the archeological record just shows a lot of violence and a lot of what is left, a lot of negativity is drawn from it. But actually if you look at it in a certain lens, they are amazing, amazing moments of positivity in the showing of how humans flourish. That for me is continues to be a fascination.

Nat Damon: And there's so much hope to that example. It's this idea of this hope that every human being, regardless of disability, regardless of ability, regardless of social

cultural context, can flourish in a compassionate society. And bringing it right back to the beginning here, the classroom. It starts with the classroom, and if we can model this in the primary years, the elementary school years, and make this a baked-in part of the curriculum of every school, UK, US, around the world, then it can foster this hope that we will be bringing out of humanity, our best, our better angels.

Nat Damon: Jimi, I'm just so grateful that you were here today to speak with us about compassion and its importance. Is there any one topic that we have not addressed, or do you feel like we've covered the gamut, and this has been a very, very, a complete discussion?

Jimi Slattery: No, no. That's fine. It's been great to talk around the various issues in education. The only thing I would say is our project is free.

Nat Damon: That's important to say.

Jimi Slattery: Part of the Dalai Lama's mission is that this is available to everyone for free. So if you are interested in this and you want to find out more, come to our website, [compassionmatters.org](http://compassionmatters.org). or put Compassion Matters into a search engine and you'll find us. We're always happy to have discussions with schools. The resources are there to be used so please get in touch with me. We can work together.

Nat Damon: Jimi Slattery, executive director of Compassion Matters in Oxford, England. You shared a bit earlier. There's a school on every continent.

Jimi Slattery: Not in Antarctica.

Nat Damon: Not in Antarctica? Come on the penguins. They can get kind of boisterous.

Jimi Slattery: Compassionate penguins.

Nat Damon: Yes. Compassionate penguins. Let's get it down to Antarctica then you've got-

Jimi Slattery: But every other continent at the moment.

Nat Damon: That's awesome. That's awesome. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me, and speaking with us today, about the importance of compassion, particularly with this youngest generation. Thank you, Jimi Slattery.

Jimi Slattery: Thank you.

Announcer: You've been listening to Reach, Teach, Talk with Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for a future episode, you can send your suggestion or questions to [nat@reachacademics.com](mailto:nat@reachacademics.com).