

Public health and compassion: Exploring the interface

Matthew J. Neilson · Shamsuzzoha Babar Syed

Abstract: Many parts of society are experiencing declining compassion, while there is increasing evidence from the health sector on the benefits of compassion. Public health approaches are a practical and effective means of taking population-level action on issues that challenge health and wellbeing, such as communicable and non-communicable disease, substance misuse, gambling, and violence. A public health approach to compassion therefore merits exploration, although existing literature speaks little to this issue. Drawing on public health approaches to issues affecting health and wellbeing, we propose a three-pronged conceptual approach to public health and compassion, noting the need to understand compassion and its determinants through application of epidemiological methods, implement targeted and universal interventions, and scale successful interventions while leveraging related public health initiatives. This approach, which builds on guiding principles of social justice, equity, solidarity and participation, provides a starting point for understanding public health approaches to compassion.

Keywords: nature exposure, nature connectedness, emotion regulation strategies, mental wellbeing

1. Introduction

Compassion increasingly has been highlighted as a desirable societal value associated with improved wellbeing¹, and compassion within health care has shown a variety of measurable benefits². However, evidence suggests that societal compassion and empathy are decreasing², with trends that reflect, and even encourage, reduced compassion. For example, social isolation is on the rise in many populations, in particular amongst already-marginalised groups^{3,4}; this limits meaningful social contact that might foster the empathy and understanding that underpin compassion. Increasingly polarised political discourse erodes the common ground that could support compassionate interaction^{5,6}. Socioeconomic disparity is also on the rise in many countries⁷, which may reduce social cohesion and encourage discrimination against disadvantaged groups.

A 2022 review exploring the epidemiology of compassion suggested that the tools of epidemiology, the science that guides public health, could be applied to compassion⁸, and that a public health approach could help understand and promote compassion at the population level. In this paper, we present examples of public health approaches and explore their potential relevance for promoting compassion.

In the 19th century, CEA Winslow described public health as “the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting health and efficiency through organized community effort and informed choices of society, organizations, public and private communities, and individuals”⁹, a definition since adopted and adapted by organisations and

individuals promoting public health approaches to societal challenges¹⁰. A public health approach can be considered broadly as an organised and data-driven effort to understand and address an issue of public health significance, prioritising analysis and action on the level of the population rather than the individual. Public health approaches have been used to drive population-level action on a wide variety of challenges to health and wellbeing¹¹. Examples include issues traditionally considered within the scope of public health activity—such as communicable disease control, health literacy, and non-communicable disease—and those that are also addressed by other sectors, such as violence and gambling¹¹.

2. Lessons from existing frameworks

2.1 Cardiff model of violence prevention

The seminal Cardiff Model for violence prevention¹² outlines four key steps in a public health approach:

1. Define the problem through systematic data collection
2. Identify risk and protective factors
3. Develop and evaluate interventions
4. Scale up effective interventions

This model emphasises the core role of epidemiological approaches to interrogate public health issues and identify targets to modify population risk. As described by Addiss et al., research in psychology and neuroscience has identified risk factors and interventions (e.g., compassion training) to promote compassion at the individual level.⁸ However, there remain many opportunities for the application of epidemiology to advance our understanding of compassion, particularly in scaling efforts from the individual to the collective level⁸, suggesting that a public health approach to compassion should be grounded in systematic application of epidemiological methods.

2.2 Pirkis' public health approach to suicide prevention

The public health approach described by Pirkis et al. to address suicide similarly notes the need to identify and shift risk, recognising the key role of social determinants of health, including commercial determinants¹³. Social determinants of health are “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, and people’s access to power, money and resources”¹⁴ and have been found to impact a broad range of health outcomes¹⁵. Social determinants influence not only individual health but also the distribution of health across a population. While little specific research exists, it appears likely that the capacity of individuals and populations to give and receive compassion is influenced by social determinants.

Pirkis et al. propose that outcomes depend upon an interplay between social determinants and individual risk factors, and that a combination of universal and selective interventions must be considered within the public health approach¹³. This mixture of universal and targeted interventions has been noted as a component of a variety of public health approaches, for example those on adverse childhood experience¹¹. If we consider compassion as an inherent social good that can improve wellbeing, then it follows that universal interventions that aim to increase population compassion are of value for a public health approach, alongside those that target people most at risk from lack of compassion.

2.3 Public health approach to gambling

The UK Association of Directors of Public Health and UK Faculty of Public Health have called for a public health approach to gambling that similarly acknowledges the need for action across whole populations, alongside action targeting those most at risk¹⁶. Of note in this proposed approach is that it is “based on core values and principles, such as human rights, equity, and collective responsibility”. This values-based approach may be well-suited to addressing compassion as an inherently relational concept and one that necessitates a practical application of empathy, which is essential for addressing human rights and social justice^{17, 18, 19}. Indeed, the need for health systems to invest in relationships and tackle social justice is increasingly recognised²⁰, suggesting that a public health approach to compassion that incorporates such values may support wider health system goals.

2.4 Public health approach and Primary Health Care

Compassion demands a move beyond pity and simple awareness of suffering, to action to alleviate suffering, which requires a closeness to and involvement with those experiencing distress²¹. This could be facilitated through meaningful engagement with, and empowerment of, communities, which is noted by WHO as one of the essential public health functions²² and has been identified as a key component of public health approaches, for example in incorporating insights from lived experience of substance abuse within public health programming²³.

Empowerment of communities is also highlighted within the Primary Health Care (PHC) approach as one of its three core components, alongside integrated health services to meet people’s health needs throughout their lives and addressing the broader determinants of health through multisectoral policy and action¹⁹. The PHC approach, which has been widely endorsed globally²⁴, asserts that societal goals for health and wellbeing can only be achieved through attention to public health as well as clinical services, highlighting the value of public health approaches within broader health policy. WHO has proposed a central role for compassion within efforts to advance the PHC approach¹⁹, noting that implementing PHC requires cultivation of compassion at the personal, interpersonal and system-levels.

2.5 Aligning compassion with other public health goals

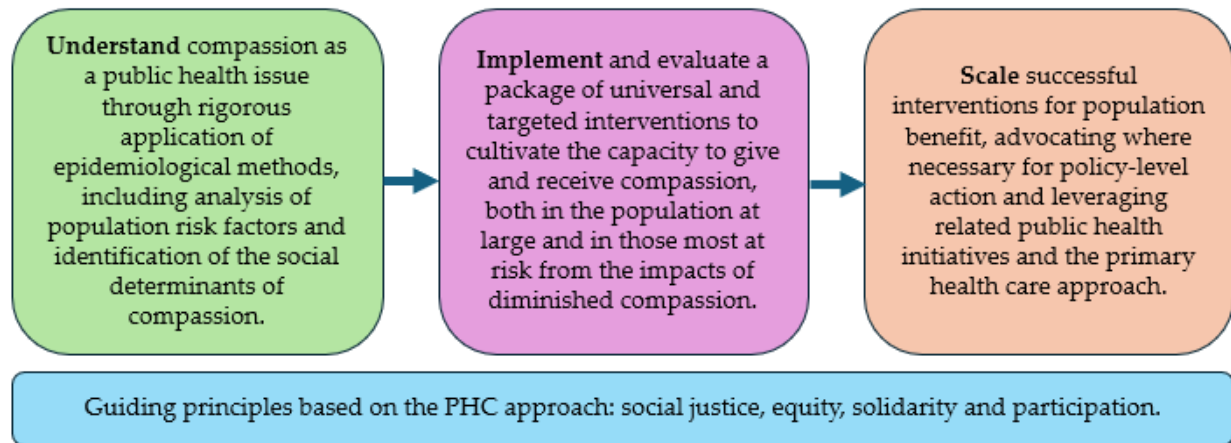
Notably, existing public health programmes, even if not directly focusing on compassion as an intervention or an outcome, may have a role in fostering compassion through action on other health issues. For example, in the UK, Doncaster’s pioneering “compassionate approach to weight” prioritises compassionate and empowering support, social justice and fairness, and clear messaging on valuing all persons²⁵. Such examples highlight the interrelatedness of different public health initiatives and the opportunities for compassion to be embedded within public health approaches for other issues.

Finally, a core attribute of many public health initiatives is advocacy²⁶, given the need for policy-level action on determinants of health in order to advance wellbeing – actions that often sit beyond the sphere of control of those implementing public health programmes. In a context of social and political fragmentation, increasing and competing health needs, and nascent understanding of compassion as a public health goal, a focus on advocacy may be of particular importance.

3. Key components of a public health approach to compassion

Drawing on these existing public health approaches and their interface with compassion, we propose the following conceptual approach to public health and compassion, summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual approach: Public health and compassion



This conceptual approach to public health and compassion requires the systematic use of epidemiological methods to understand compassion and plan action not only at the level of individual interaction but also in creating the social conditions that facilitate compassion. Such action may include intervention on the social systems that serve to promote or suppress compassion. It also recognises that compassion is an inherently relational and equity-focused concept, requiring an approach that centres values and human experience alongside scientific rigour.

Effective application of the public health approach to compassion will require additional work to realize each of these three main tenets, in particular to understand how population-focused interventions for compassion can be advanced pragmatically by communities, organisations and governments. This three-pronged approach does however provide a useful compass for researchers, policy-makers and public health leaders.

3.1 Application of a public health approach to compassion

Such an approach could be operationalised at a variety of levels and within a variety of settings. At a national level, for example, population survey or census planning could incorporate measurement of compassion and its determinants, allowing for large-scale longitudinal data to be collected, while interventions could be integrated within national strategies on related areas such as health, social care, education and criminal justice.

At sub-national level, public health authorities might have access to data that could identify local at-risk populations. They may be able to leverage links with the primary health care system when designing interventions and, as natural advocates for evidence-based approaches to population wellbeing, may also be well-placed to make the case for multi-sectoral action on compassion.

This three-pronged approach could also be used within specific services or populations. Within educational institutions, for example, cross-referencing student data with epidemiological analysis of compassion risk factors may allow for identification of groups most likely to benefit from compassion-related interventions. Possible areas for intervention might

include redesign of existing wellbeing programs, consideration of teacher-student interactions, and initiatives incorporate student voices into policies on admission, attendance and discipline. The smaller size of specific settings may allow for rapid application of quality improvement cycles to test and scale.

3.2 Limitations of a public health approach to compassion

While evidence from other public health issues shows that public health approaches can be effective in driving change, implementation of a public health approach to compassion may face significant challenges. Firstly, public health approaches necessarily take a long-term view, and action on the determinants of compassion is unlikely to be quick or easy. Secondly, compassion is inherently relational, experienced on a human level between individuals. Public health approaches, implemented at a population level, may appear to be impersonal and inappropriate for promoting compassion. Public health approaches to compassion will require careful thought, both on how to account for relationality in population-level interventions, and on how institutions and public health authorities themselves express compassion. Thirdly, proposing public health action on compassion might be rejected by some as an exercise in virtue-signalling or an imposition of values that are not held by certain populations. Clear communication, co-design, and careful implementation will be needed. Finally, there is an inherent complexity and uncertainty in defining success. While for other public health issues the desired impact may be clear—for example increased survival or reduced incidence of disease or injury—there is no simple scale or unified agreement on the giving or receiving of adequate compassion at a population level. This highlights the importance of improvements in measurement of compassion for public health approaches.

4. Conclusions

Building on the increasing evidence for the role of compassion within health care, enhancing compassion at the population level is an appropriate application of the public health approach. Further analysis of the constituent components of various public health approaches can inform efforts to understand and promote compassion. We contend that a structured and values-based public health approach, grounded in epidemiology, has the potential to address compassion at the population level in a meaningful way, with the potential to create the conditions for this inherent social good to flourish.

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