By Jen Christensen, CNN

Updated 6:54 AM ET, Wed April 12, 2017

Want to be happy and successful? Try compassion

Who doesn’t want to be happy? — As research into our mysterious gray matter continues to explode, scientists are getting ever closer to understanding what creates a calm, contented and happy brain. Answer these questions to see whether your brain is wired to be happy or if you might need to practice positivity.

Story highlights

Compassion for others can lead to more friends, success and sustainable happiness

Training to be more compassionate changes your brain for good

(CNN) — Looking for a way to be happier? Are you seeking deeper connections with friends or looking for more friends? Want to relate better to your co-workers?

Try a little compassion.

Compassion, as one scholar describes it, is “experiencing feelings of loving kindness toward another person’s affliction.” It’s related to, but a little different from empathy, which the same scholar defines as “feeling with someone, that is, sharing the other person’s emotion.”
But compassion is not for the touchy-feely Oprah set alone. The U.S. military and professional sports teams found real success with mindfulness and compassion training. In fact, the baseball team that incorporated mindfulness practice into their routine last year, the Chicago Cubs, won the World Series. The “lovable losers” hadn’t won a World Series in 108 years.

”'This training is not for wimps,' as my grad student, who was a former football player, used to say,” said Amishi Jha, an associate professor of psychology. ”This is for the toughest of the tough who want to make the world better and benefit personally, too.”

Jha has U.S. Department of Defense contracts to teach mindfulness and compassion to the military. At the University of Miami, she works with football players and regular students to teach them resilience in the face of high stress, and regular everyday stress, too.

What she, and many other scholars have found, is that compassion is key to coping. The compassionate tend to have deeper connections with others and more friends. They are more forgiving and have a stronger sense of life purpose. Many studies have shown these results.

Compassion also has direct personal benefit. The compassionate tend to be happier, healthier, more self-confident, less self-critical (pdf), and more resilient.

But if you've ever struggled to find loving kindness for the guy who cut you off on your morning commute, know you are not alone.

Recent politics have exposed real anger, coldness and polarization among Americans, polls say. We may even be getting less compassionate, as a 2009 study showed.

Compassion takes practice. But if you do practice, the experts promise the next time you get cut off, while you may not be happy about it, it won't ruin your morning.

How do you get to compassion?

A whole industry exists to teach you compassion, but it doesn't have to cost you money. You can start simply with a common exercise called the Loving Kindness Meditation. All you need is a quiet space and about 20 minutes, or 15 minutes if the thought of having to find 20 stresses you out.

In that quiet space, sit in a comfortable position. Focus on your breath and try to clear your mind. The key is to be present in that space in that time. Then mentally focus on your heart area and think about someone you feel tenderness toward. This could be your spouse or your mom or your child.

Dwell on those positive thoughts for a little bit. Then extend that same feeling toward yourself. Ruminate on that for a little while. Then expand that feeling out to others. Maybe think of someone you aren’t as close to and think tenderly about them.
This may sound a little woo-woo, but several studies show this simple exercise really does strengthen your sense of compassion.

Why does it work?

Even short-term exercises like this broaden your attention, your thinking and your overall sense of well-being in a way that lasts. That's in part because it changes your brain.

Compassion helps your brain become more flexible to instinctively help you become more altruistic, or pro-social, toward others.

You also become more accepting of your own failings. That's what a 2014 study in the journal Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience found. In this experiment, there were three small groups of women who were subjected to videos of distressing images. One group got empathy training. Another got compassion training.

The control group got basic memory training. When researchers looked at their brains before and after two training rounds, they saw a difference in reaction to the same distressing video.

The people with the compassion training still felt these negative emotions, like those with empathy training did, but the part of their brain connected with reward and positive effect also lit up.

For the empathy trained, the part of the brain associated with threat and social disconnection was engaged instead. That suggests they'd likely shy away from the pain they were seeing and not be as apt to help. That also meant those who had the compassion training saw an increased positive affect of the training and decreased negative affect, as compared to the other trainings.

Compassion prompts your brain to have a wider sense of what's going on and it gives you access to more ideas on how to act. When your brain feels threatened like it does with pain, even someone else's, it focuses on the pain only to make it go away, and shuts down those other avenues that incentivize you to help.

Who should you try compassion training?

Compassion training has helped others who experience regular stress in their work. After compassion training, doctors and nurses who suffer a lot of professional burnout become better caregivers and feel empathy without internalizing a patient's distress as their own.
School children who did a short eight-week compassion training program functioned better overall, a study showed. After the training, even students who struggled with mental challenges such as ADHD had better attendance and behavior records, and their grades improved.

Dr. Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi developed a cognitively based compassion training program at Emory University that is based on Tibetan contemplative methods. Negi has seen stressed students and members of the public make remarkable progress.

"There is a real benefit to this practice, including physical health benefits and a real reduction in physical signs of stress," Negi said. His studies have documented success in specific patient populations, including breast cancer survivors and people with PTSD, and for those with run-of-the-mill stress.

"Creating an environment in which people can learn soft skills and emotional intelligence -- these are so important," Negi said.

The happiness that can come from compassion training is the kind that lasts, unlike the fleeting feeling of happiness that might come, for example, when you buy a new car. (Scientists call this the hedonic treadmill effect.) Happiness derived from compassion is sustainable.

"Developing compassion, sets a foundation for the stability of the mind," Jha said. "And developing intrinsic compassion, a concern for the suffering of others and for oneself, that can be very powerful ... for all involved."