

When the kitty alarm went off this morning a little after 5, compassion was not the first thing on my mind. It was more along of the lines of “oh, cat!- whyever can’t you let me sleep until I am ready to get up?” I did get up briefly then and did what was needed and lay down again, not to sleep but to consider what I had not yet done for this service, and this began to come to me.

Compassion has been defined as feelings of humanity, of concern for and sympathy for those who are suffering. Some synonyms are love, charity, big-heartedness, kindheartedness, mercy and more. What is not talked about in the straightforward definition is what that calls to in us, what it asks of us. Where are the feelings of compassion originating in us? Does it come from “the gut”, from the heart, or from the mind’s perceptions of another’s distress? How do we nurture it?

For me, I feel most strong emotions solidly in my solar plexus, or seemingly so. I know that loss, grieving, worry, and anger can all find a home there, and radiate throughout my body. So too can compassion- and in a real and physical way it too can be founded in the gut, where bacteria and digestive system functions act nearly as a second brain for the body’s physical health. If you google for how gut bacteria affects emotion, you will come across some fascinating data-- And I quote from the IFL Science Newsletter:

As explained in the journal [Psychosomatic Medicine](#), the team found that there were two primary groups of bacteria that appeared to have some effect on the constitution of the brain. The first, the Prevotella, were found most commonly within seven of the women. These participants’ brains showed a [greater connectivity](#) between the emotional, attentional, and sensory brain regions, while having smaller and less active hippocampi, the region of the brain that is related to emotional regulation, consciousness and the consolidation of short-term memories into long-term ones.

These women appeared to experience profoundly negative emotions, including those related to distress and anxiety, when viewing negative images.

The second bacterial group, the Bacterioids, were more prevalent in the other 33 women. Consequently, they had a very different type of brain. The regions of the brain linked to problem-solving and complex information processing had more gray matter than the other group of women. Their hippocampi were also more voluminous and active.

These subjects, in contrast to the Prevotella-prominent women, were less likely to experience negative emotions when being shown negative imagery.

This research is indubitably fascinating, but as with plenty of these studies, it merely proves that a strong correlation between cognition and the gut microbiome exists. The causal mechanisms are deeply uncertain at this point, and this particular study involved an incredibly small sample size.

A far more diverse population may come up with very different results. The prevalence of Prevotella, for example, [varies wildly](#) in the gut microbiomes of, say, European and African children.

In any case, the idea that certain gut bacteria not only influence thought processes, but the physical structure of the brain itself, is, for lack of a better word, mind-boggling.

A separate analysis back in 2015 points out that "the human gut harbors a dynamic and complex microbial ecosystem, consisting of approximately 1 kg of bacteria in the average adult," which, rather incredibly, is "approximately the weight of the human brain."

Make no mistake about it: our gut microbes are a major part of our biological framework, and the more we understand about them and their links to other parts of our constitution, the better."- end quote

Now how does this relate to today's service? Well, let's see if I can hook this up-

If many emotions are generated in the guts by bacteria, what really is their function within our biosphere of the individual body? How can we adapt our behavior to encompass that thought? If instead of the classic line "oh, that's just the liquor talking", what if we said " my bacteroids are depleted, I need some nutritional support!" Highly unlikely in my opinion, but still a factor we don't understand and will undoubtedly be finding out more about.

So coming back to compassion- sometimes where we might most need to practice it is within the framework of the very things that can stress us the most- home and family life, work relationships, friendships and other emotionally impactful situations. One of the ways in which we can practice compassion is to take the time to cook for ourselves and for others, and to put care into the making of the food, to focus our intent on what that food can do for us and for those we give it to-how it might nourish them, uplift them, support their guts, and yes, even aid their flora!

Today's service is centered on the stories and recipes of just some of the literal multitudes of people who have taken time to care, taken time to originate recipes and make them time and again, people who have shown and experienced compassion for fellow human beings. We salute them and thank them- we would not be here without them.