



## FROM SYMPATHY TO ACTION

*"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."*

—Aesop

### OVERVIEW

Students reflect on readings and engage in discussions about the responsibilities they have to address suffering and injustice in larger society.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year
- To cultivate global citizenship and a positive classroom and/or school community
- To help students see the value and benefits of compassion and kindness (as well as their limitations)
- As part of a class or advisory period that focuses on student citizenship and social responsibility

#### TIME REQUIRED

- 1-2 class sessions

#### LEVEL

- High School
- College

#### MATERIALS

- Facing History and Ourselves' online publication [Choosing to Participate](#): "From Sympathy to Action" (pp. 28-33)
- Four pieces of chart paper (for "Silent Conversation" activity)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand some of the limits to human compassion
- Reflect on what makes some people take action to alleviate others' suffering
- Consider what encourages and discourages them to take personal action to help others

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- After reviewing the reading in preparation for this lesson, ask yourself several of the key questions you will be posing students:
- What issues or circumstances might motivate you to act on behalf of those in need?
- What do you think discourages you from helping others?
- What can be done to create a society where more people take action to help those in need?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### OVERVIEW

- This lesson draws from Facing History's online publication [Choosing to Participate](#): "From Sympathy to Action" (pp. 28-33), which features two texts that help students think about the factors that encourage and discourage people to act when they confront suffering or injustice.
- The studies described by journalist Nicholas Kristof reveal that most people will take action to save one life, before they take action to save many lives. Yet, the story of Nicholas Winton, a British man whose efforts during World War II saved nearly 700 children, many of them Jewish, represents how some people do take extraordinary effort to improve the lives of many.
- Together, these two accounts help students think about the responsibilities individuals have to address suffering and injustice in larger society.

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## PREPARING TO READ

- **Anticipation Guide:** Before asking students to read the “From Sympathy to Action” text, here are some possible statements you could include in an anticipation guide which students can complete before they read “From Sympathy to Action.” Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
  - People respond to the suffering of many, more than the suffering of one individual.
  - The more you have in common with someone, the more likely you are to help them.
  - Being altruistic (caring about others and trying to help them) is a personality trait – it cannot be taught.
  - To be a hero you must risk your own life or property.
- **Note:** You may also consider incorporating [Text to Text/Text to Self/Text to World](#), a teaching strategy that promotes comprehension by helping students see how the ideas in the text connect with their own lives, society, and their prior knowledge.

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## RESPONDING TO THE TEXT

- **Silent Conversation:** Once the students have read “From Sympathy to Action,” use the [Silent Conversation teaching strategy](#) to debrief this text. Choose quotations from the reading to put on the sheets of easel paper (one quote per sheet). Suggested quotations:
  - Evidence is overwhelming that humans respond to the suffering of individuals rather than groups . . . (Kristof).
  - In one experiment, people in one group could donate to a \$300,000 fund for medical treatments that would save the life of one child—or, in another group, the lives of eight children. People donated more than twice as much money to help save one child as to help save eight. (Kristof)
  - Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren’t born...What starts as mere willingness becomes intense involvement. (Erwin Staub)
  - I think there is nothing that can't be done if it is fundamentally reasonable. (Winton)
- **Identity Chart:** After reading “From Sympathy to Action,” students can also create an [Identity Chart](#) for Nicholas Winton. (For more information about Winton, students can explore [www.powerofgood.net](http://www.powerofgood.net)).
  - Drawing from the ideas on the identity charts, students can discuss the question, “What factors motivated him to help save children during World War II?”
  - Then have students create their own Identity Charts and then answer the question, “How might aspects of your identity influence your decisions, now or in the future, to help others? What issues or circumstances might motivate you to act on behalf of those in need?”
- **Journal:** Here are a few possible prompts you might use. (Read more about using [journals in the classroom](#).):
  - For most people, why is it easier to help one person rather than a whole group?
  - Even though he saved hundreds of children, Nicholas Winton does not think that he is a hero. He insists “I was never in any danger. I took on a big task, but did it from the safety of my home in Hampstead.” What do you think it means to be a hero? Do you think Nicholas Winton is a hero? Who else would you consider to be a hero?
  - What does the title “The Power of Good” mean to you? Identify a moment in your life or in history that you think exemplifies “the power of good.”
  - Under what circumstances are people most likely to help others? What do you think discourages people from helping others? What can be done to create a society where more people take action to help those in need?

## CLOSURE

- When students have finished their journal, invite students to share their responses in pairs and/or with the whole group.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did you and your students respond to this lesson? What were your biggest insights?
- How might your students apply concepts from this lesson to their own lives? Did they identify particular issues or circumstances that would motivate them to help others in need?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In this lesson, the central reading draws directly on research that has been replicated in multiple studies. For example, in one [study](#), people who read the story of a single, starving African girl donated more money to an anti-hunger charity than did people who read an appeal featuring statistics on starvation in Africa.

In another [experiment](#), when people were given the chance to help either an anonymous sick child or a sick child identified by her name and age, the donation amounts hardly differed. But when a photo was added to the sick child's profile, donations for her medical care shot up dramatically.

When more people are suffering, people ironically feel less—a phenomenon researchers call “[the collapse of compassion](#).” If we become worried about being overwhelmed or burned out by compassion for many sufferers, we may strategically turn off our compassion as a result by actively controlling our emotions.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The upshot of this research is that our students can choose whether or not to feel compassion for mass suffering. This choice will depend upon whether they are motivated to avoid compassion and whether they have the skills to regulate their emotions. If we can help our students (and ourselves) get past the fear of being overwhelmed, and teach them strategies for staying with rather than avoiding compassion, then we can increase our [compassion bandwidth](#).

Ultimately, if we take action to help others, we can also benefit. Studies suggest that people who engage in prosocial behavior enjoy greater [physical](#) and [emotional well-being](#), have a stronger [sense of meaning](#) in their lives, and are [more satisfied with life](#) overall.

## SOURCE

Facing History and Ourselves is a nonprofit international educational and professional development organization. By integrating the study of history, literature, and human behavior with ethical decision-making and innovative

teaching strategies, Facing History enables secondary school teachers to promote students' historical understanding, critical thinking, and social-emotional learning. As students explore the complexities of history, and make connections to current events, they reflect on the choices they confront today and consider how they can make a difference. [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)