

# Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT)

## – Protocol and Key Concepts

Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT) began as an interdisciplinary pilot project in 2005 to test the psychological and physiological effects of compassion meditation in college undergraduates, an idea that originally stemmed from an Emory University undergraduate, Molly Harrington, who had a concern for students' mental health and the rising number of undergraduate suicides. Charles L. Raison, M.D., acted as the principal scientific investigator and Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi, Ph.D., as the principal contemplative investigator. As a basis for this research, Dr. Negi developed the CBCT protocol, drawing from the Tibetan Buddhist traditions of *lojong* (mind training) and *lamrim* (the stages of the path for spiritual development), but establishing it as a secular practice for general use. Research with undergraduates continued for five semesters and eventually led to an NIH grant to explore the effects of compassion training among adults[1]. It also led to a number of other research projects involving CBCT with adolescents in foster care[2], elementary school children[3] (see [chapter 1](#) in this volume), individuals who had attempted suicide, victims of trauma, and others. A teacher training program has since been developed due to the demand for CBCT programs, both for research and outreach.

CBCT was designed with the intention of developing a secular meditation protocol that recognized the strengths of existing meditation programs while building on them in a few distinct ways. At the time, the majority of secular meditation programs did not primarily focus on analytical meditation and did not draw from the rich *lojong* tradition. In the *lojong* tradition, compassion meditation practice requires practitioners to actively work with their emotions in order to develop a deep feeling of affection for others and a strong positive connection with others, employing both non-analytical and analytical (or cognitively-based) styles of meditation. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, compassion practice is considered to confer immeasurable benefits to the individual and to society.

CBCT recognizes that all human beings have an innate capacity for compassion, a result of our evolutionary heritage as mammals, which require maternal care in order to survive (see [chapter 7](#) in this volume). Nevertheless, it takes active cultivation to bring this level of innate compassion to the state of genuine altruism. The Tibetan *lojong* tradition, a system of “mind training”, seeks to bring about this transformation through cognitive, analytical techniques that, when practiced sincerely, will enable an individual to reframe relationships with others. The degree to which a person is able to transform relationships through this process is dependent on the degree to which that person is able to relate to others with affection, which engenders deep feelings of endearment and tenderness towards others. We are using affection to translate the Tibetan word *yid-'ong*, which conveys the sense of someone who is cherished and pleasing to the mind, such as the immensely pleasing way a baby appears to its parents. Affection is the catalyst that activates empathy to spark the development of compassion. Developing a sense of affection is thus crucial to the process, and the tradition presents guided steps for its successful cultivation. Different approaches for cultivating affection are described in various lineages of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, each lineage providing robust pedagogical and experiential training tools. Dr. Negi chose the materials for the protocol from the lineages that would be appropriate for a secular research context. Since some strands of reasoning for developing compassion rely heavily on the Buddhist philosophical doctrine of reincarnation, they were not incorporated. Our use of the term “secular” should not be understood as implying a rejection or exclusion of religion. Rather, it aligns with the