

Compassion as a cure?

Disabled staff navigating academic ableism

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Overview of presentation

- What is compassion/ableism with an academic context?
- Introduce our compassionate learning work.
 - Methodology and findings of study.
- Next steps: New Disability Research Network.

What is compassion?

- **Empathy** – an awareness of another person's suffering, and a desire to help.
 - **Not pity** – pity objectifies and dehumanises an individual for their 'faults'
- **Compassion** – empathic actions designed to alleviate suffering.
- Compassion can be used in any context – not just in disability. We can all learn strategies to become more compassionate (both to ourselves and others).

What is ableism?

- Ableism describes the societal systems that promote the value of being able-bodied.
- Associated with disabled people's experiences, but ableism is intersectional – any 'devalued body' can be affected by ableism (e.g. Campbell 2009).
- Academic ableism describes the embedded practices within higher education that devalue particular bodies.

Why do we need compassion in academia?

- Academia promotes cultures of individual exceptionalism and competition.
- Disabled people (and any minority group) experience academic barriers because of this – we are made to feel as though we are problems.
- Compassion allows for honest and human discussions, and collective support to emerge.

Methodology

- Ongoing research in this field, but today we will talk about two focus groups in 2020 with disabled students and researchers.
- Seven participants – including us.
- Focused on our experiences of COVID-19, and the implications for academia and inclusive research.

Findings

- Academic ableism denies all people the opportunity to express how we are truly feeling.
- There is a value in finding a collegial and safe space with other disabled people, where we can all be honest (maybe 'vulnerable'?), particularly in times of COVID.
- This vulnerability is a strength, and opens us all up to compassion – we can learn and share strategies.

Conclusions

- Does not address the systemic ableism that we experience as disabled people in academia.
- But, compassion does provide a response for coping with the ableism we experience (even if only momentarily).
- 20% of the world is disabled, and anyone can become disabled. Skills of compassion benefit everybody.

Next Steps: Disability Research Network

- We have recently been awarded a substantial grant to create a new disability activist-led research network.
- Five year project, which will start in August.
- Compassionate learning skills will be one of our interests that we will continue to explore.
- Anyone who is interested, please email us!

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