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Keys for Living
This month the Key is: Compassion

I was recently reading an interview with Roger Lewin, a psychiatrist who has written a book for psychotherapists about compassion. He calls compassion "*the core value that animates psychotherapy.*" I was struck by his words, as I often describe *my own practice approach as **competent and compassionate, with a holistic view.*** Those three things sum up what **I** see as the three key elements of good psychotherapy.

Compassion means: seeing the whole person, responding with respect, being mindful of our relatedness as fellow humans, seeing each other's vulnerabilities. It also means sometimes setting limits, saying "no," speaking the difficult truth -- but always with *respect and mindfulness.*

How and where can we find compassion in our selves? Dr. Lewin notes that, first, "*we must be deeply acquainted with our own experiences and feelings.* . . We must know what it is to hurt and be hurt. We must be intimate with **our** own angers, dangers and despairs. . . with our own capacity for joy and pleasure." According to Dr. Lewin, "compassion looks at the world from the point of view of human vulnerability."

Frequently, "**self-acceptance**" and "**compassion towards others,**" are mirrors. Leandis, a wise healer, states, "You can't condemn someone else, because if you do, you're condemning yourself. . . **We are all connected.** . . The weaknesses we see in others are our own. That's a reflection." *Often, when we find ourselves being critical of others, it is a clue that somewhere in our own hearts, we are lacking self-compassion.*

But there is more to compassion. As Dr. Lewin writes, "**Compassion can be very confrontational. Compassion can be insistent. Part of being compassionate is often daring to provide people with ripe, juicy, nutritive "No's."** As a caring adult or parent, it is from compassion that we don't allow our four year-old to play in the street, despite their tantrums.

Compassion does not mean we let ourselves be walked on or always find other's behavior acceptable. It means we know ourselves, our values, and vulnerabilities. And we live by our values, sometimes saying "no," but always trusting that the other person is on their own journey and doing what they need to learn their lessons — sometimes from us and our compassionate behaviors.

Lewin shares "*There is nothing else in human experience that has the personal, intimate and enduring force of . . . being known with compassion for what one is, a small and vulnerable and precious fellow being.*" That is what animates therapy and life!