

<http://psychcentral.com/news/2012/07/23/foster-kids-learn-resilience-from-compassion/42094.html>

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Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on July 23, 2012

A new cognitively based intervention has been shown to improve the mental and physical health of adolescents in foster care.

Researchers found the technique was associated with a reduction in the inflammatory marker C-reactive protein (CRP), reduced [anxiety](#) and increased feelings of hopefulness. Emory University researchers studied the new approach, Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT), in collaboration with the Georgia Department of Human Services and the Division of Family and Child Services.

Researchers suggest that CBCT is unique in that it provides strategies for people to develop more compassionate attitudes toward themselves and others.

Children in foster care invariably have a history of trauma in their lives. In many cases difficult circumstances such as sexual abuse, parental neglect, family violence, homelessness, and exposure to drugs triggered placement in the foster home.

The foster home process involves separation from biological family and often requires movement from one place to another.

"Children with early life adversity tend to have elevated levels of inflammation across their lifespan," said Thaddeus Pace, Ph.D., lead author and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Emory. "Inflammation is known to play a fundamental role in the development of a number of chronic illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, dementia, cancer and [depression](#)."

Researchers found a dose-response relationship as the more the study participants practiced, the greater the reduction in CRP markers, less reports of anxiety, and increased feelings of hopefulness were observed.

"The beneficial effects of CBCT on anxiety and feelings of hopelessness suggest that this intervention may provide immediate benefit to foster children," said Charles Raison, M.D.

"We are even more encouraged by the finding that CBCT reduced levels of inflammation. Our hope is that CBCT may help contribute to the long-term health and well-being of foster care children, not only during childhood, but also as they move into their adult years."

The findings are salient as that a high proportion of children in foster care programs across the United States are on psychiatric [medications](#), perhaps inappropriately, according to a recent article in the peer-reviewed journal *Pediatrics*.

"In light of the increasing concern that we may be over-medicating children in state custody, our findings that CBCT can help with behavioral and physical health issues may be especially timely," said Linda Craighead, Ph.D., senior author for the paper published in *Child and Family Studies*, and professor of psychology at Emory.

Cognitively-Based Compassion Training is a multi-week program. Although derived from Tibetan Buddhist teachings on compassion, the CBCT program has been designed to be completely secular in nature.

In the study, 71 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 were determined to be eligible for study participation. All of the children lived in the greater metropolitan Atlanta area, and were in state custody (i.e. foster care) at the time of the study.

The participants were randomized to six weeks of CBCT or to a wait list control group.

Study methods included assessment of various measures of anxiety, and hopefulness, before and after the CBCT program. Participants also provided saliva samples for the measurement of C-reactive protein.

The researchers found that within the CBCT group, participation in practice sessions during the study correlated with reduced CRP from baseline to the six-week assessment. Although the findings were resoundingly positive, researchers say that further studies will be needed to determine if there are long-term benefits with Cognitively-Based Compassion Training.

The study was recently published online in the journals *Psychoneuroendocrinology* and *Child and Family Studies*.

Source: [Emory University](#)