

# Neanderthals had feelings too, researchers say

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Courtesy of the University of York  
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**Neanderthal people had a deep-seated sense of compassion, their brutish reputation notwithstanding, according to new research from the University of York, U.K.**

The study also examines the emergence of compassion in other early humans. Scientists "have traditionally paid a lot of attention to how early humans thought about each other, but it may well be time to pay rather more attention to whether or not they 'cared'," said archaeologist Penny Spikins of the university.

Spikins and colleagues have embarked on what they call the "unique challenge" of charting the development of human compassion. They studied archaeological evidence for the way emotions, as they claim, began to emerge in our early ancestors and then developed to more recent humans such as Neanderthals and ourselves. The research by Spikins, Andy Needham and Holly Rutherford is published in the research journal *Time and Mind*.

They propose a four-stage model for the development of human compassion. It starts six million years ago when a common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees experienced the first awakenings of an empathy for others and motivation to help them, perhaps with a gesture of comfort or moving a branch to let them pass.

The second stage, from 1.8 million years ago, sees compassion in the human ancestor *Homo erectus* beginning to be governed as an emotion integrated with rational thought. In this picture, care of sick people represented an extensive investment, while the emergence of special treatment of the dead suggested grief at the loss of a loved one and a wish to soothe others' feelings.

In Europe between around 500,000 and 40,000 years ago, early humans such as *Homo heidelbergensis* and Neanderthals developed deep-seated commitments to the welfare of others, as illustrated by a long adolescence and a dependence on hunting together, the researchers propose.

They also cite what they call evidence of routine, long-term care of the injured or infirm. This includes the remains of a child with a congenital brain abnormality who was not abandoned but lived until five or six years; and those of a Neanderthal with a withered arm, deformed feet and blindness in one eye who must have been cared for, perhaps for as long as 20 years.

In modern humans starting 120,000 years ago, compassion was extended to strangers, animals, objects and abstract concepts, according to the Spikins group's model.

"Compassion is perhaps the most fundamental human emotion. It binds us together and can inspire us but it is also fragile and elusive," Spikins said. "This apparent fragility makes addressing the evidence for the development of compassion in our most ancient ancestors a unique challenge, yet the archaeological record has an important story to tell."

Spikins will give a free public lecture about the research at the University of York on Oct. 19. The researchers are also publishing the study as a book, *The Prehistory of Compassion*, with all proceeds promised to go to the charity World Vision.