Abstract

Empathy Spectrum Disorder (ESD) is proposed as a transdiagnostic framework for understanding empathy dysregulation as a developmental, neurobiological, and relational process. Rather than viewing empathy as a binary trait or universal good, ESD conceptualizes it as a flexible capacity that may be overdeveloped, suppressed, fragmented, or strategically deployed. Drawing from affective neuroscience, trauma theory, and humanistic psychology, the model identifies six subtypes: Hypoempathic, Hyperempathic, Rational, Dysregulated, Shutdown, and Dark Empathy. Each reflects adaptive responses to early relational experiences, nervous system patterning, and environmental demands.

The framework integrates distinctions between affective and cognitive empathy, polyvagal-informed stress responses, and sociocultural influences on emotional expression. A clinician toolkit is outlined, including interview protocols, physiological measures, and observational grids to support subtype identification and intervention planning. Ethical considerations emphasize cultural humility, gendered expectations of emotional labor, and the risks of pathologizing adaptive behaviors.

Though preliminary, ESD provides a dimensional alternative to categorical empathy-related diagnoses in the DSM and ICD. It offers a compassionate, clinically actionable model that situates empathic dysfunction as an adaptive but potentially distressing response. Future directions include psychometric validation, neurobiological subtype mapping, and longitudinal studies of empathic integration.

Keywords: empathy, trauma, regulation, neurodivergence, transdiagnostic framework