Episode Transcript

MAUGHAN: You're such a buzzkill.

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DUCKWORTH: I'm Angela Duckworth.

MAUGHAN: I'm Mike Maughan.

DUCKWORTH + MAUGHAN: And you're listening to No Stupid Questions.

Today on the show: Which is more important: sympathy or empathy?

DUCKWORTH: I don't really know how much a person can truly empathize with another person. Empathize. Not sympathize, but empathize.

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DUCKWORTH: Mike, we got this really interesting question from a listener named Karina, and I am going to read it to you.

MAUGHAN: Okay, let's go.

DUCKWORTH: "Hi Angela and Mike. What is the clinical difference between 'empathy' and 'sympathy'? I understand the various semantic arguments and opinions about the differences, but I'm looking for whether there are any established definitions within the scientific community and whether there's research on differentiating between empathy and sympathy. Typically, sympathy gets a bad rap — as if it's just empathy done selfishly. Are they really that different from each other? Thank you so much." I love this question.

MAUGHAN: You do?

DUCKWORTH: I do. I, I watched this — okay, I could be hallucinating, but I recall watching this — it's been a long time.

MAUGHAN: I could be on ayahuasca, but —.

DUCKWORTH: No, I'm serious! Like, I'm thinking back to when I was in elementary, middle school, and high school. I would come home, and I would, like, watch General Hospital*. And then, I would watch* The Oprah Winfrey Show, *because Oprah Winfrey came on after* General Hospital*. And I think I remember — I mean, I do remember, I'm just saying I could be hallucinating — this episode where Oprah Winfrey talked about the difference between empathy and sympathy. Now, of course, I know more. But I'm just saying, I think it's such an interesting question. Have you ever thought about this question? Empathy and sympathy?*

MAUGHAN: So, I'm going to reveal a bias right now.

DUCKWORTH: You're pro one and against the other?

MAUGHAN: No, I kind of don't care. I feel like it's semantics a little bit.

DUCKWORTH: Karina, the answer is that Mike does not give a hoot.

MAUGHAN: For me, it's more about just, like, how do you best show up for other people?

DUCKWORTH: You're like, "These semantic differences are silly."

MAUGHAN: Look, I think we should absolutely engage in the conversation. I completely think that the outcome of being either a sympathetic, or empathetic, or just kind, or compassionate, whatever-we're-going-to-call-it person is really, really important — maybe among the most important things in the world. I just don't always love the semantic argument.

DUCKWORTH: That's okay. I mean, the question is: is it useful to distinguish between two ways of feeling for another person? But if I recall this Oprah Winfrey *episode — I guess I don't have to recall it, because now I'm a psychologist, and now I, I know how psychologists use these words.*

MAUGHAN: Now you can just talk about it.

DUCKWORTH: I mean, we do actually — we, as psychologists — make a distinction between sympathy on one hand and empathy on the other. And, again, these are arbitrary labels in a way, but the idea is that sympathy is when you feel sorrow — like, if somebody else is feeling badly, that has a weight for you. That you feel moved by that, right? And you can even feel badly that that person is grieving a loss or catastrophizing and really anxious. I mean, you could feel something for that person. That's sympathy. But empathy is really putting yourself in their shoes. Like, they feel grief, you feel grief. They feel panic, you feel panic. They feel joy, you feel joy. So, empathy, you know, you're really living, vicariously, the other person's experience. That's the important distinction. And yeah, you could say, like, "Well, why does this one have this label and this one have the other label?" But I think it's an interesting distinction.

MAUGHAN: And I, I think that it's very valuable to understand how best to relate to people, right? I will just say, my brother, Mark — if you call Mark and you're having a really bad day or some crappy thing happened, Mark is the epitome of just saying something like, "Ugh, that is the worst." Or he'll just sit there and be, like, "I am so sorry."

DUCKWORTH: You say, "I am so sorry" a lot. Well, because I must tell you a lot bad — I'm like, "Wait a second! Hold on." But I do tell you a lot of bad things.

MAUGHAN: But that's a lesson I learned from my brother, Mark. He doesn't try to fix it. He doesn't try to put himself into the conversation.

DUCKWORTH: And he's not empathizing, right? You would say that's sympathizing, not empathizing, because he is sorry for you, but he's not feeling the same feeling that you're feeling at that time, right?

MAUGHAN: I think that that's true.

DUCKWORTH: Because that's the distinction.

MAUGHAN: First of all, I'll just say I really appreciate Mark, and if I am good at that at all, it's probably because I've learned from him. Mark's been a great lesson

to me in how to just connect with people and sit with them in their situation. I will say this: in, like, the Judeo-Christian tradition, there are teachings that talk about mourning with those that mourn; comforting those who need comfort. It's that idea of when someone's mourning, you mourn with them. And I think that that's probably empathy but one of the great lessons I learned—.

DUCKWORTH: But when you said, "comfort those who are suffering," that doesn't mean suffer when they are suffering.

MAUGHAN: No, "comfort those who need comforting, mourn with those that mourn."

DUCKWORTH: I'm just saying that you could read it different ways. One of those phrases: "Mourn with those who mourn." Like, cry with those who cry. Smile with those who smile. Laugh with those who laugh. That feels to me like empathy, because that's the whole point of empathy, right? That we can experience the emotions that another person is experiencing. But then it's, like, "comfort those who need comforting" — like, that feels to me more like sympathy because it's like, "Oh, this person is grieving the loss of a loved one, and I'm going to go comfort them, but I am myself not going to experience grief."

MAUGHAN: Which is great because maybe it's teaching both: have sympathy and have empathy. Here's what I want to say though. I think it's really: One of the lessons I've learned in life from other people is that I think that there's really a lot of beauty in celebrating other people's successes. Like, when they're excited about something, it's really beautiful to be excited with them. I have a friend who just got into some exclusive club thing, and he was so excited, and it's —.

DUCKWORTH: Wait, wait, wait, I want to know more. What club?

MAUGHAN: It's related to Disney.

DUCKWORTH: What?

MAUGHAN: It's some really exclusive Disney club that, like, is not published anywhere.

DUCKWORTH: Wait, Disney as in Mickey Mouse and, like, Disney World?

MAUGHAN: Yeah, Disney. Like, you go to Disneyland or Disney World, and there's this club that is sort of secret, and it takes years to get into, and you might never get in and whatever.

DUCKWORTH: I'm just trying to imagine any human who would want to be a member of such a club, because I can't think of a place I want to go less than Disney World, but, like, I love that there's a secret club in Disney World.

MAUGHAN: That's highly prestigious.

DUCKWORTH: Okay, so when you heard this, did you feel the feeling of giddy exclusivity or whatever? Or did you just feel, like, happy for them?

MAUGHAN: I don't feel the same thing, because I'm not a Disney person, but I knew it meant a lot to this individual who's telling me the story. And you know what I did feel? I felt excited, because I care about this person, and I know how

excited he is. And I think there's something really beautiful about the contagion of excitement — not just like, "Oh, I'm happy for you." But, like, I felt excited because I knew how excited he was.

DUCKWORTH: Well, it's interesting because obviously we should be able to empathize about negative and positive emotions, but usually when people say like, "Oh, that person's really empathetic," they're often thinking about, like, oh, when you're having a bad day, they can feel for you, et cetera. But, by the same token — and there's lots of research that shows this — it's such a buzzkill when you are really "fill-in-the-blank," including: excited, giddy, proud, carefree, et cetera, and the person that you're with, that you communicate this to, doesn't mirror that emotion. I mean, when someone says, like, "Oh my gosh, I got into this, like, exclusive club at Disney!" If it were me, part of me would be, like, "The worst four days of my adult life were spent in Disney World." I'm not kidding. There was a hurricane on the fifth day, and we had to go home early, and I literally kissed the ground. I got down on my knees and my hands, and I kissed the ground. I was like, "Thank God I get to go home."

MAUGHAN: You're such a buzzkill.

DUCKWORTH: Okay, but I wouldn't say that to this person! I'd be like, "What?! Disney!" And so, I think we can be empathetic about positive emotions. We can be empathetic about negative emotions. I just think it's really interesting that you're like, "Okay, I get that." But for you, this, like, nuance between like, were you experiencing their excitement? Or were you just happy that they were happy? I think it's really interesting that it's not, like, a bright line for you, and it's not even necessarily something that you would find super useful to know. Is that right?

MAUGHAN: Yeah, and maybe I'm way off. I would just say that, again, when I call my brother, Mark, and I'm having a really bad day, and he says, "I'm so sorry, that's hard," I don't know if it's empathy or sympathy. What I do know is that that makes me feel better. And I know that when my friend comes to me with some exciting news, and I can feel that same level of excitement because I care about them, I think that's really important.

DUCKWORTH: Wait, let me you question: if you went to Mark and you were worried about something that was going to happen in the future — like, freaking out about whether it was going to actually happen, go poorly, or whatever, what would Mark say? And what would Mark feel, you think?

MAUGHAN: I don't know for sure, but I think he would say, "Man, that's really hard that you're worrying about that. That's really tough to have to consider all those things."

*DUCKWORTH: So, I would say that is sympathy. Because what empathy would be is: "Oh my God! Oh s***, it's going to happen — like, oh God, what are we going to do?"Right — because.*

MAUGHAN: Right, they feel it with a panic with you.

DUCKWORTH: Because, empathy would be, like, "Oh, "I'm also panicked." I mean, I think that's why psychologists have found it useful. I'm not saying everybody has to find it useful. And by the way, in everyday language, when I say, "Hey, I think it's important to hire people who are empathic as well as gritty," I

don't think C.E.O.s are like, "Well, do you really mean empathy, or do you really mean sympathy?" The word "empathy" actually is more common. I mean, Karina was like, "Oh, I think sympathy gets a bad rap." But interestingly, Karina, empathy is the word I think that, like, most people use to kind of include both. But interestingly, I was looking this up after getting Karina's email, and it turns out that the word "sympathy" and the word "empathy," the etymological roots — I mean, they both have "pathos" or "path" in it, and that's "feeling." So, there's feeling in both empathy and sympathy. And then "sym" comes from the root for "with." So, like, you know, "I can feel with you." Some people would argue that would have been a better word for empathy. But what's really interesting is that the word "sympathy" goes back to the 16th century, but the word "empathy" actually only goes back a hundred years. So, empathy is, like, a newcomer. Like, when you go to Hallmark cards, you can buy a sympathy card, but you can't buy an empathy card, right? The modern English usage, which is now prolific — like, we're all using the word "empathy" these days much more often, I think, than we're using "sympathy" — goes actually back to this German word, which I will not pronounce correctly, but like, "Einfuhlung," and that is, like, to transport yourself into somebody else's feeling. So anyway, what's interesting is they both have feeling in it. And I think this "empathy" phrasing that seems to have developed over the last century has just kind of overtaken everything. And so, I don't think if I, like, stood up and said to a C.E.O. like, "Hey, in addition to grit, make sure you're hiring people who have sympathy" — like, that just wouldn't sound right to them. Like, it doesn't sound like a capacity the way empathy does.

MAUGHAN: Let's say that it is important to distinguish the difference. There's a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto named Paul Bloom. Are you familiar with Paul?

DUCKWORTH: I know Paul.

MAUGHAN: So, he wrote a book, which you may have read, called Against Empathy. *So, where do you think he falls on the spectrum?*

DUCKWORTH: This, I know, because I know — I know the book. He's a very famous psychologist. He's very famous for his work on children, on development of moral emotions — so, like, when and how do children develop emotions like guilt, and shame, and pride, right? These are moral emotions. They're thought to keep you from doing psychotic, antisocial things — like, killing your siblings in the crib.

MAUGHAN: Way to go to something really chill.

DUCKWORTH: Well, you know, that is why some would argue these emotions develop around two and three, because it's around the time that your mother has another kid. And when you think about it in, like, cold-hearted evolutionary terms, it's, like, better for you to survive and get all of your mother's attention than to have this sister or brother come on the scene and dilute the attention and the resources from your mom. But that's a theory about why you start to feel things that prevent you from doing terrible things. So, that's what moral development research is about. And that's — Paul Bloom is now kind of famous for lots of things, but I remember when this book came out because I was talking to a friend about empathy, and I got into an argument. I'm not even going to tell you who this person is because it was such a terrible argument that I sent, like, six emails afterwards. I felt so terribly. And then, actually she didn't answer them, and then I felt really terribly. And then it turns out she didn't get them. But in this argument, I

said to her, like, "I don't really know how much a person can truly empathize with another person." Empathize. Not sympathize, but empathize. I said to her, like, I think we have profound limits on empathy. Like, you come to me, and you're panicked, or you feel like you're left out, or, you know, you have imposter syndrome, whatever, and you tell me, like, how much can I really feel? Like, you're hungry. Can I feel your hunger? And I was like, "I don't think we can." And then, she argued the opposite, and it was, like, this super heated argument, and then I left her office, and then I sent her six emails that she didn't answer. But anyway, that was around the time that Paul wrote his book.

MAUGHAN: Well, this is why I think it's not worth debating if you lose friendships over it. No, but here's something I thought was really interesting in, in Paul's book. He talks about the negative implications that can come from empathy. Obviously the book's called Against Empathy*. And he wrote about this study by psychologist Daniel Batson where there are two groups of people who listen to this recording of a terminally-ill child describing their pain. One group was asked to identify with and feel for the child.* *Another group was instructed to listen objectively but not engage emotionally. Now, I don't know how you can actually for sure not engage emotionally, but after listening to the recording, they asked everyone, "Would you move this patient up on the prioritization list for treatment?" And in the emotional group, three quarters of the people decided to move the child up — against the opinion, by the way, of medical professionals. So, the issue as Paul Bloom describes it, is you're putting other individuals at risk because you're not choosing the greater good. And there's a guy, Paul Polman, he's the former C.E.O. of Unilever. He's been quoted as saying: "If I led with empathy, I would never be able to make a single decision. Why? Because with empathy, I mirror the emotions of others, which makes it impossible to consider the greater good."*

DUCKWORTH: Do you agree with that?

MAUGHAN: I think that it's important to be a boss that is human. You have to consider the needs of your individual employees, of your team members, and you have to do that in context for what's best for the company. So, for example, if a company is going to completely go out of business, that is in the end worse for more people than having layoffs that hurt a percentage of individuals, but allow the company to continue to go and serve clients and employ a lot of other people. So, sometimes there are decisions that you have to make in context of the greater good, even if that doesn't allow you to quote-unquote, "be empathetic" toward specific individuals and their circumstance.

DUCKWORTH: So, you would say that empathy is dangerous, because if you really empathized fully with one, you know, single mom who was going to be laid off and all the problems it was going to create for her and how she would feel, you might actually not do the layoffs, which would be a sort of kindness to that one person but would be an unkindness to everybody else.

MAUGHAN: And maybe 10 other single moms end up getting laid off as well. But again, I'm going to argue both sides a little. I think you have to be human, and you have to be compassionate. So, that doesn't mean that you don't find a way to also help that single mom who's been laid off by making sure they have appropriate severance, and all those things.

DUCKWORTH: You could argue that you have to be sympathetic, but not

empathetic.

MAUGHAN: Right. Because I think in these macro decisions you have to consider the greater good of the whole.

DUCKWORTH: So, that puts you on "team sympathy," right? I know you didn't want to be on a team because you're like, "Why do we have to put on jerseys in the first place?"

MAUGHAN: I'm happy to be on a team. I'm happy to take that bullet. Are you on "team sympathy"? Are we on the same team, if we're going to do teams here?

DUCKWORTH: I have this, like, visceral desire to be on "team empathy," but I think it's the more immature side of me. You know, I, I told you — I do tell you a lot of negative things. I remember when I was really struggling with writing my book. I mean, that was rough and not that long ago. Some part of me — some, like, less-mature part of Angela — when I'm feeling this kind of, like, complete distress, does want the friend, the husband, the confidant to feel some of my distress, to, like, really feel it. That's the part of Angela that wants to, like, be on "team empathy," but I think Paul Bloom is right actually. Let me read you — I found this interview that Paul did after his book came out. And he says, "Empathy as we're talking about it is: 'I put myself in your shoes.' So, how many people can you do that with? Well maybe I could do that with you and some other guy at the same time. You're feeling different things, and I, I kind of got them both in my head. Can I do it for 10, or 12, or 100 people? No. Maybe an almighty god could do that, could empathize with every living being. But typically, we zoom in on one." And I, I said all that stuff about how he's a moral psychologist, because this would be the argument that a lot of psychologists like Paul Bloom would make: they would say that there is a right answer to these moral dilemmas and that is the greatest good for the greatest number of people. And I think Paul Bloom would argue that empathy gets in the way of that solution because that solution is statistics. That solution is, like, a calculation, in a sense. And if we zero in on one person's story, and then we feel their feelings, and we look to the left, and we look to the right, and we only see what that person sees to the left and to the right, then we can't take this, like, bird's-eye view and make correct moral decisions. So, I think that's the backdrop of all this. And I don't really think like a moral psychologist, but I know when I come to you, Mike, you do always say — now that I know it comes from your brother, Mark, I think it'll add a whole level of nuance. But I — I don't know what it is about you, but I have often called you over the years with very emotional problems of one kind or the other. And I think it may be that you're providing such sympathy. Like, I don't actually think it would be that helpful if you broke down in tears while I was breaking down in tear — like, so I think when you say, like, "I'm sorry, that sounds really hard," and you mean it, and I can hear it in your voice that you mean it, it's not exactly like one of these moral dilemmas and like, "Oh, are you going to allocate the kidney to the right person?" But even in that one-on-one conversation, I'm like, "You know what — even just for me, and I'm the only person here — I think it's probably better that you're feeling sympathy and not empathy." So, I think, not only would Karina, but Mike and I would love to hear from our listeners about what they think of sympathy and empathy. If you have thoughts on the subject, please record a voice memo in a quiet place with your mouth close to the phone and email us at NSQ@freakonomics.com. Maybe we'll play it on a future episode of the show. If you like the show and want to support it, the best thing you can do is to tell a friend. You can also spread the word on social media or leave a review in your favorite podcast app.

Still to come on *No Stupid Questions*: Where is the line between sympathy and pity?

MAUGHAN: "Oh, I'm so sorry for your situation, you poor little thing."

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Now, back to Mike and Angela's conversation about sympathy and empathy.

MAUGHAN: One challenge I have with sympathy — I've mentioned my challenge with empathy — is that I think sympathy can come dangerously close to pity sometimes. And I think that there is nothing quite so offensive as pity. I abhor being pitied.

DUCKWORTH: Really? What?

MAUGHAN: I don't want your pity. I really have an allergic reaction to having people feel sorry for you.

DUCKWORTH: So, if you say, "I'm so sorry," which is a classic Mike Maughan expression — or maybe I should say it's a classic Mark Maughan expression, but, like, "I'm so sorry" — I guess there's a huge difference for you between, "I'm so sorry," and "I'm so sorry for you."

MAUGHAN: Or "I feel sorry for you." "I feel sorry for you" just seems so patronizing.

DUCKWORTH: And why do you think that is? Like, I don't disagree with you. I don't think anybody wants anyone's pity. But it's such a nuance. Like, what is this ocean in the space between, like, "I feel sorry for you" and "I'm so sorry."

MAUGHAN: Well, and this is why I think this is an important distinction. So, as much as I said I don't want to get into the nuance of semantics, maybe I do. And I think the reason pity is so challenging is because it does feel very patronizing. It feels like you're better than I am, and you're trying to say, "Oh, I'm so sorry for your situation, you poor little thing." And it's like, "No. I don't want you to be better than me. I want you to feel with me or feel for me, but not pity me."

DUCKWORTH: Not look down on me.

MAUGHAN: Yeah, "look down on." Have you ever read The Elegance of the Hedgehog*? It's a beautiful novel, written incredibly well. One of the main characters, her name is Renée Michel. She was raised in this family that — basically just that her parents never really cared about her. They would just kind of grunt, whatever. She ends up being a concierge at this really upscale Parisian apartment building and kind of hides underneath her unseemliness and awkwardness and doesn't reveal that she is really smart. But early in the book, she's telling this story about when she's five years old, and she first goes to school, and her teacher calls her "Renée." And the beauty of hearing your own name, this was the moment she came alive.*

DUCKWORTH: Just hearing her own name, like, instead of a grunt.

MAUGHAN: Yeah! And her teacher is helping her take off her raincoat, and she looks up into her teacher's eyes, and she thinks that for the first time in her life, she's experiencing, like, love from another human, or compassion. And then it has

this line: "In the moment where I had at last come to life, I was merely pitied." And that line has stuck with me for years, because it broke my heart that this little girl —.

DUCKWORTH: Wait, what happened in the novel? This is, like, so great and she feels seen and individuated. Where was the pity?

MAUGHAN: But she looks up into her teacher's eyes and realizes that what she thought was love or compassion was actually just pity. And that line stuck with so much, and I vowed to do everything I can to never make anyone feel pitied. Because I think that's maybe the worst application of — misapplication of — sympathy or empathy is to pity someone.

DUCKWORTH: I mean, Karina asked us to distinguish between sympathy and empathy. And I think we have, Karina. Sympathy is feeling for someone. Empathy is feeling what they're feeling. And then, now we're talking about pity, which is definitely in the same family. And I think pity comes from the same root, like "pathos," "to feel." But, you know, when I saw the movie Parasite, *which I don't think you've seen, right?*

MAUGHAN: I have not. No.

DUCKWORTH: But you know that it won the Academy Award for best picture, I think, the year that it came out. It's, like, the Korean film.

MAUGHAN: It sounds familiar. I'm not a huge movie-watcher.

DUCKWORTH: That's okay. I have seen almost no movies, but I was forced to watch this movie by Jason because he was like, "This is an important and great movie." But it was really hard to watch. And I won't spoil the plot for you, but the premise of the movie is that in this Korean society, there are "the haves" and "the have-nots." And the feelings, I think, are really the plot of the film. Like, what does it feel like to be at the bottom of the hierarchy versus at the top? I think when we talk about pity — and here's where I'm just telling you what I think as a psychologist — but I, I feel like pity and contempt are, like, almost visually you are looking down on someone. When I get really mad at Jason, which, as you know, I do on occasion — not often, but it's happened. I don't think I've ever looked down, though, at him. It's like we're eye to eye. And I think, like, people who study the predictors of divorce and what emotions precede people getting divorced, contempt is, like — I think it's, like, No. 1. And to me, like, contempt and pity are like, "Not only am I your adversary, but I'm up here and you're down there." And when I watched Parasite *— when I was forced to watch* Parasite *— it so vividly portrayed what it's like to feel like, in society, you're — you know, like in the caste system in Hinduism, like, you're the untouchable. You're the shadow. So, I think when you're saying that you never — I mean, I can hear it in your voice, Mike, like, you don't want someone's pity. Sympathy is one thing, pity is another. Maybe we could say: pity is, like, I'm looking down at you and seeing that you're in distress and in a bad place. Sympathy is I'm looking you eye to eye and seeing that you're in a bad place. And empathy is like, I'm looking out of your eyes, right? Like, I'm seeing the world through your eyes, and I'm standing in your shoes.*

MAUGHAN: No, I actually think that's a really healthy way to kind of understand these three thing — I know, Karina, your question was about sympathy and empathy, but I think the eye thing, adding pity, helps really understand what are

the three different things. And to your previous question, why is it so important to understand the distinction?

DUCKWORTH: You know, there's a really new paper that came out on this topic. It was just published in 2024. And it's a meta-analysis, meaning you take all of the studies that ever been done on a certain topic, and you average together what the results are, and you say, like, "Okay, given everything that we know, what can we say about empathy and sympathy?" And this was about kids. This is saying: what is correlated with, like, positive emotional functioning overall? Are these kids more empathetic? Are they more sympathetic? Or just both? Right? Like, is there no distinction? And the conclusion of the paper based on studies that included collectively over 25,000 children was that when you look at the data carefully, it's really clear that sympathy correlates with general overall emotion regulation and emotional health, but empathy does not. So, when you think of kids growing up — and again, these are terms that, maybe in casual conversation, these nuances are not what people mean, but it is better to have a kid who can feel for other kids but not through their eyes with the same exact, you know, physiological responses and so forth. So, Karina, that is definitely a "team sympathy" paper. And that's the very latest research. Mike, I think this terrain that we've covered with empathy and sympathy — and I love that you have annexed the domain of pity to the conversation — I think it's so important. And I, I think the reason why the nuance was interesting to Oprah Winfrey and why it's interesting to Karina, like, kind of comes back to, you know, something that Karina said in her original question: "Sympathy gets a bad rap," like, "is one more selfish than the other?" I think the question that I have for you is: when you express sympathy eye to eye with another person, do you feel like that is selfish or, like, you know, completely altruistic or, like, none of the above? Is one of these things the more proper and ethical thing or is it just sort of spontaneously what you want to do?

MAUGHAN: This is where I feel like the most important thing is just being a really kind person. I don't know that there is necessarily a good or bad. Again, I think pity is always wrong. I think sympathy is generally the way to go. I think empathy occasionally, especially on positive emotion — like, I want to feel your level of excitement. I don't want to put myself in for you. I don't want to act like I just won a gold medal. But if I'm a really good friend, I hope that I feel so much excitement for your excitement. I hope I share that with you. And I think that that's really important. I'd love to share with you, regardless of whether this is sympathy, or empathy, or any of these things, just about being a human, my favorite story of how to deal with maybe some negative emotions. Because often when you have a friend who's lost a loved one, or some really negative thing happens, we, we often don't know what to say. Let's be frank — usually there isn't anything that you can say. It's not going to make it better.

DUCKWORTH: I'm really, like, not very good at this, I have to say, so I'm really listening for advice.

MAUGHAN: I don't know that I am either.

DUCKWORTH: I bet you are.

MAUGHAN: I'll give you just two brief examples. One is I think you just show up. My friend lost his dad, and everybody was texting he and his wife, saying, "What can I do to help? How can I" — da da da da da. And this is one time in my life where I did it right. I just showed up at their house with, like, massive amounts of

groceries and food. And they told me later that they were so tired of the "How can I help?" "I don't know, don't put the burden on me." But I went into their house — I had the garage code — and I just filled their fridge and filled everything up, and that was it. It was like, "Just do something." But I'll tell you my favorite story of all time. It comes from the Old Testament, the Book of Job. It's, you know, studied as one of the great poems of all time. The story of Job is he loses everything. He's this rich guy married with wonderful kids and all this stuff, and all in the swoop of a very short period of time, loses all of his wealth, his kids all die, his health goes, and he's completely ravaged, and his wife literally says, "Your life sucks. Curse God and die." And in the midst of all this, Job has three friends — three buddies who come together to just go visit him. And as they're walking toward him, they don't even recognize him because he's so disfigured from all of his sickness and whatever. But this is my favorite line. It says that these three friends, "for seven days and seven nights, they sat beside Job on the ground. And none of them said a word, for they saw his suffering was very great." And I think so often when it comes to "How do we treat each other?" Just show up. There's nothing to say. It's a tragic, awful, terrible thing that may have happened to you. I love this. They just sat there. Because there's nothing to say, but so often it's just — just show up.

DUCKWORTH: I think that is, like, so eloquently put, Mike. I feel like this empathy-sympathy thing is actually relevant. Maybe one reason why empathy can be dangerous is that if you really take on the emotions of the grieving and stuff, like, then it's horrible to really feel the grief of a loss. So, then what do we do? Well, we don't want that, so you just don't. So you, you know, avoid the person, or you don't think about it. And so, I'm going to just argue that showing up is the best possible advice, but empathy can get in the way of that. Sympathy can allow you to show up and be present, but empathy is just terrifying, right? So you're just going to detour your life around that person. So, again, I guess it's, like, one more vote for "team sympathy." And I think your advice is great. I'll give you one bit of advice that's from Jason. We were recently with friends who had had a loss. So, this was a widower, who had lost his wife, was now living alone. And again, me, the bumbling idiot, not knowing what to do — you know, I'm talking about the dinner, and "this is really great chicken," and like, "I love the sauce," and I think I'm deliberately not talking about the wife, who's now passed and so forth. And Jason, at a point in the conversation, puts his hand on this person's hand and says, "How are you doing?" And it's clearly an invitation to talk if they wanted to. Like, I think what I do often is this avoidant behavior, and maybe empathy is the reason I'm scurrying around and away from the emotions that are present. But if you can have sympathy and be present and show up and look the person in the eye — and not avert your gaze because you're looking at the eye, you're not looking through their eyes, like, maybe that is the most compassionate, the kindest thing that you can do.

MAUGHAN: You can pretend to care, but you can't pretend to show up.

And now, here's a fact-check of today's conversation:

Mike and Angela discuss a piece of scripture that reads, quote, "mourn with those that mourn… and comfort those that stand in need of comfort." Mike notes that the teaching is part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which makes it sound as if it appears in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. The language is actually from Mosiah Chapter 18 of The Book of Mormon.

Then, Angela references the "untouchables" of the caste system in India. People at the bottom of the hierarchy *were* historically referred to as "untouchables" — but today they're

more commonly called Dalits, derived from a Sanskrit word meaning oppressed or broken.

Angela also says that the words "sympathy" and "empathy" come from the Greek word "pathos," to feel, and that she believes "pity" shares this etymology as well. "Pity" is actually derived from the Latin *pietas*, meaning piety.

We have one last note for you today — not a correction but a celebration. This conversation marks the 200th episode of *No Stupid Questions*! Thank you to our listeners for making it possible. Here's to 200 more!

That's it for the fact-check.

Before we wrap today's show, let's hear some thoughts about last week's episode on what makes a good gathering.

> *Austin CRAM: Hi,* No Stupid Questions*. This is Austin coming at you from rural Gippsland in southern Australia. Something that I realized listening to your most recent episode on what makes a good gathering is that I've found that I much more appreciate gatherings for things like role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons or board-game nights, and they have a lot of the same hallmarks as what you said makes a good gathering, in that, Dungeons and Dragons groups, they build that level of intimacy, because it's the same people week on week or gathering after gathering, and you're doing a structured social activity together. And the same can be said for board-game nights, because each board game lends itself to a natural stopping point for some people who decide, actually, no, I don't want to play another game, I'm going to use this opportunity to leave.*

> *Will GOODMAN: This is Will for Mount Kisco. I just finished listening to your episode on what makes a good gathering. I've been part of a Sunday morning tennis group for nearly 30 years, and there have been three of us who were there from the beginning, but we have had a rotating cast of probably 20 different people. And all of us are serious tennis players — good club-level players. We play in different games, but this one is special. Sunday is just different, and we talk quite a bit about it, and it's about the consistency. But it's also, as I said, that we've had new people come in and out, but every person who joins is committed to playing hard but fair and make sure they show up. And it's just created an environment that every one of us looks forward to. People try to get in the game, and we don't always have room. But as people have come and gone, we've just kept a culture that's very special and convinced that it even is going to lengthen our lives. It's been a wonderful 30 years, and hopefully we're going to play for another 15 or 20 — as long as we can. Thanks so much!*

That was, respectively, Austin Cram and Will Goodman. Thanks to them and to everyone who shared their stories with us. And remember, we'd love to hear your thoughts on sympathy and empathy. Send a voice memo to NSQ@Freakonomics.com, and you might hear your voice on the show!

Coming up next week on *No Stupid Questions*: is it unhealthy to have unrealistic dreams?

> *MAUGHAN: It will never happen. It would be terrific, but it would never happen.*

That's next week on *No Stupid Questions*.

* * *

No Stupid Questions is part of the Freakonomics Radio Network, which also includes *Freakonomics Radio*, *People I (Mostly) Admire*, and *The Economics of Everyday Things*. All our shows are produced by Stitcher and Renbud Radio. The senior producer of the show is me, Rebecca Lee Douglas, and Lyric Bowditch is our production associate. This episode was mixed by Greg Rippin. We had research assistance from Daniel Moritz-Rabson. Our theme song was composed by Luis Guerra. You can follow us on Twitter @NSQ_Show and on Facebook @NSQShow. If you have a question for a future episode, please email it to NSQ@Freakonomics.com. To learn more, or to read episode transcripts, visit Freakonomics.com/NSQ. Thanks for listening!

DUCKWORTH: "Tomayto, tomahto; potayto, potahto."

Read full Transcript

Sources

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- **Paul Bloom**, professor of psychology at University of Toronto.
- **Paul Polman**, businessman, author, and former C.E.O. of Unilever.

Resources

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- *Parasite*, film (2019).
- King James Bible, Job 2:1-13.
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Episode Video