

Empathy

A. What Is Empathy?

Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, see things from their point of view, and imagine yourself in their place. Essentially, it is putting yourself in someone else's position and feeling what they are feeling.

Empathy means that when you see another person suffering, such as after they've lost a loved one, you are able to instantly envision yourself going through that same experience and feel what they are going through.

B. Empathy Definition:

Merriam-Webster defines empathy, in part, as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another."

While people can be well-attuned to their own feelings and emotions, getting into someone else's head can be a bit more difficult. The ability to feel empathy allows people to "walk a mile in another's shoes," so to speak. It permits people to understand the emotions that others are feeling.

C. Signs of Empathy:

For many, seeing another person in pain and responding with indifference or even outright hostility seems utterly incomprehensible. But the fact that some people do respond in such a way clearly demonstrates that empathy is not necessarily a universal response to the suffering of others.

If you are wondering whether you are an empathetic person, here are some signs that show that you have this tendency:

- You are good at really listening to what others have to say.
- People often tell you about their problems.
- You are good at picking up on how other people are feeling.
- You often think about how other people feel.
- Other people come to you for advice.
- You often feel overwhelmed by tragic events.
- You try to help others who are suffering.
- You are good at telling when people aren't being honest.
- You sometimes feel drained or overwhelmed in social situations.

- You care deeply about other people.
- You find it difficult to set boundaries in your relationships.

D. Types of Empathy:

There are several types of empathy that a person may experience. The three types of empathy are:

- **Affective empathy** involves the ability to understand another person's emotions and respond appropriately. Such emotional understanding may lead to someone feeling concerned for another person's well-being, or it may lead to feelings of personal distress.
- **Somatic empathy** involves having a physical reaction in response to what someone else is experiencing. People sometimes physically experience what another person is feeling. When you see someone else feeling embarrassed, for example, you might start to blush or have an upset stomach.
- **Cognitive empathy** involves being able to understand another person's mental state and what they might be thinking in response to the situation. This is related to what psychologists refer to as the theory of mind or thinking about what other people are thinking.

E. Empathy vs. Sympathy vs. Compassion

While sympathy and compassion are related to empathy, there are important differences. Compassion and sympathy are often thought to be more of a passive connection, while empathy generally involves a much more active attempt to understand another person.

F. Uses for Empathy:

Being able to experience empathy has many beneficial uses.

- **Empathy allows you to build social connections with others.** By understanding what people are thinking and feeling, you are able to respond appropriately in social situations. Research has shown that having social connections is important for both physical and psychological well-being.
- **Empathizing with others helps you learn to regulate your own emotions.** Emotional regulation is important in that it allows you to manage what you are feeling, even in times of great stress, without becoming overwhelmed.
- **Empathy promotes helping behaviors.** Not only are you more likely to engage in helpful behaviors when you feel empathy for other people, but other people are also more likely to help you when they experience empathy.

G. Potential Pitfalls of Empathy:

Having a great deal of empathy makes you concerned for the well-being and happiness of others. It also means, however, that you can sometimes get overwhelmed, burned out, or even overstimulated from always thinking about other people's emotions. This can lead to empathy fatigue.

Empathy fatigue refers to the exhaustion you might feel both emotionally and physically after repeatedly being exposed to stressful or traumatic events. You might also feel numb or powerless, isolate yourself, and have a lack of energy.

Empathy fatigue is a concern in certain situations, such as when acting as a caregiver. Studies also show that if healthcare workers can't balance their feelings of empathy (affective empathy, in particular), it can result in compassion fatigue as well.

Other research has linked higher levels of empathy with a tendency toward emotional negativity, potentially increasing your risk of empathic distress. It can even affect your judgment, causing you to go against your morals based on the empathy you feel for someone else.

H. Impact of Empathy:

Your ability to experience empathy can impact your relationships. Studies involving siblings have found that when empathy is high, siblings have less conflict and more warmth toward each other. In romantic relationships, having empathy increases your ability to extend forgiveness.

Not everyone experiences empathy in every situation. Some people may be more naturally empathetic in general, but people also tend to feel more empathetic toward some people and less so toward others. Some of the factors that play a role in this tendency include:

- How you perceive the other person
- How you attribute the other individual's behaviors
- What you blame for the other person's predicament
- Your past experiences and expectations

Research has found that there are gender differences in the experience and expression of empathy, although these findings are somewhat mixed. Women score higher on empathy tests, and studies suggest that women tend to feel more cognitive empathy than men.

At the most basic level, there appear to be two main factors that contribute to the ability to experience empathy: genetics and socialization. Essentially, it boils down to the age-old relative contributions of nature and nurture.

Parents pass down genes that contribute to overall personality, including the propensity toward sympathy, empathy, and compassion. On the other hand, people are also socialized by their parents, peers, communities, and society. How people treat others, as well as how they feel about others, is often a reflection of the beliefs and values that were instilled at a very young age.

I. Barriers to Empathy:

Some people lack empathy and, therefore, aren't able to understand what another person may be experiencing or feeling. This can result in behaviors that seem uncaring or sometimes even hurtful. For instance, people with low affective empathy have higher rates of cyberbullying.

A lack of empathy is also one of the defining characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder. Though, it is unclear whether this is due to a person with this disorder having no empathy at all or having more of a dysfunctional response to others.

A few reasons why people sometimes lack empathy include cognitive biases, dehumanization, and victim-blaming.

i. Cognitive Biases:

Sometimes the way people perceive the world around them is influenced by cognitive biases. For example, people often attribute other people's failures to internal characteristics, while blaming their own shortcomings on external factors.

These biases can make it difficult to see all the factors that contribute to a situation. They also make it less likely that people will be able to see a situation from the perspective of another.

ii. Dehumanization:

Many also fall victim to the trap of thinking that people who are different from them don't feel and behave the same as they do. This is particularly common in cases when other people are physically distant.

For example, when they watch reports of a disaster or conflict in a foreign land, people might be less likely to feel empathy if they think that those who are suffering are fundamentally different from themselves.

iii. Victim Blaming

Sometimes, when another person has suffered a terrible experience, people make the mistake of blaming the victim for their circumstances. This is the reason that victims of crimes are often asked what they might have done differently to prevent the crime.

This tendency stems from the need to believe that the world is a fair and just place. It is the desire to believe that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get—and it can fool you into thinking that such terrible things could never happen to you.

J. Causes of Empathy

Human beings are certainly capable of selfish, even cruel, behavior. A quick scan of the news quickly reveals numerous unkind, selfish, and heinous actions. The question, then, is why don't we all engage in such self-serving behavior all the time? What is it that causes us to feel another's pain and respond with kindness?

The term empathy was first introduced in 1909 by psychologist Edward B. Titchener as a translation of the German term *einfühlung* (meaning "feeling into"). Several different theories have been proposed to explain empathy.

i. Neuroscientific Explanations

Studies have shown that specific areas of the brain play a role in how empathy is experienced. More recent approaches focus on the cognitive and neurological processes that lie behind empathy. Researchers have found that different regions of the brain play an important role in empathy, including the anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula.

Research suggests that there are important neurobiological components to the experience of empathy. The activation of mirror neurons in the brain plays a part in the ability to mirror and mimic the emotional responses that people would feel if they were in similar situations.

Functional MRI research also indicates that an area of the brain known as the inferior frontal gyrus (IFG) plays a critical role in the experience of empathy. Studies have found that people who have damage to this area of the brain often have difficulty recognizing emotions conveyed through facial expressions.

ii. Emotional Explanations

Some of the earliest explorations into the topic of empathy centered on how feeling what others feel allows people to have a variety of emotional experiences. The philosopher Adam Smith

suggested that it allows us to experience things that we might never otherwise be able to fully feel.

This can involve feeling empathy for both real people and imaginary characters. Experiencing empathy for fictional characters, for example, allows people to have a range of emotional experiences that might otherwise be impossible.

iii. Prosocial Explanations

Sociologist Herbert Spencer proposed that empathy served an adaptive function and aided in the survival of the species. Empathy leads to helping behavior, which benefits social relationships. Humans are naturally social creatures. Things that aid in our relationships with other people benefit us as well.

When people experience empathy, they are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors that benefit other people. Things such as altruism and heroism are also connected to feeling empathy for others.

K. Tips for Practicing Empathy:

Fortunately, empathy is a skill that you can learn and strengthen. If you would like to build your empathy skills, there are a few things that you can do:

- Work on listening to people without interrupting
- Pay attention to body language and other types of nonverbal communication
- Try to understand people, even when you don't agree with them
- Ask people questions to learn more about them and their lives
- Imagine yourself in another person's shoes
- Strengthen your connection with others to learn more about how they feel
- Seek to identify biases you may have and how they affect your empathy for others
- Look for ways in which you are similar to others versus focusing on differences
- Be willing to be vulnerable, opening up about how you feel
- Engage in new experiences, giving you better insight into how others in that situation may feel
- Get involved in organizations that push for social change

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Reference: FHIL | Stages of Design Thinking | EMPATHY (2:29 mins)

<https://vimeo.com/193271084>