

Passage 1. *Jamil Zaki presents his ideas on the value of empathy in modern life.*

- 1 Just 30,000 years ago, humans were unremarkable, medium-sized mammals—not particularly strong or fast, lacking sharp teeth, claws, and wings. We were not even the only smart ape; five other large-brained species shared the planet with us. But humanity did have something that set us apart: each other. More than any other species, sapiens worked together cooperatively. This helped us become super-organisms who quickly took over the planet. 5
- 2 Our collaborative flair stems from empathy: the capacity to share, understand, and care about what others feel. Individuals who feel empathy in abundance experience greater happiness and less stress and make friends more easily. These benefits ripple outwards—patients of empathic doctors are more satisfied with their care, spouses of empathic individuals are more satisfied in their marriages, children of empathic parents are better able to manage their emotions, and employees of empathic managers suffer less from stress-related illness. Empathy strengthens our social fabric, encouraging generosity toward strangers, tolerance for people who look or think differently from the way we do, and commitment to environmental sustainability. 10
- 3 Yet for all its benefits, empathy often goes missing just when we need it most. To understand why, think back to our prehistoric past—the environment in which empathy evolved. Humans lived in tiny bands of hunter-gatherers, so that anyone you encountered was likely familiar, similar, and maybe even related to you. You could hold each other accountable for your actions. 15
- 4 Even now, empathy comes most naturally when those rules are in place. We care up close, when we can see suffering or joy on someone’s face, and we are most inclined to help people who look or think like us. 20
- 5 But these days, such rules that encourage empathy are being broken. More than ever, humans are urban, isolated, and anonymous to each other. We meet irregularly, often in online spaces that privilege outrage and leave cruelty unpunished. We are increasingly tribal, and sometimes view outsiders not as human beings but as symbols of ideas and groups we fear and hate. And when we learn about tragedy, it is often as an abstraction. We might hear about thousands of people affected by a disaster or civil war, but think of them only as faceless statistics, without any way to access their emotions. This is not fertile soil for empathy, and by some measures empathy has shriveled. 25
- 6 This might be a one-way trip. The world we have built is poorly calibrated with the caring instincts that allowed us to build it in the first place. As long as these trends of isolation and exclusivity continue, maybe we are doomed to become madder and meaner over the years. This would be bad news for empathy. It means that when we hit the limits of our care, there is nothing we can do to overcome them and become more empathic. And if the modern world has sapped our collective empathy, there is nothing we can do to recover that, either. 30
- 7 We actively turn empathy up or down, and make choices about empathy all the time. Will you cross the street to avoid a homeless person, or pay attention to their pain? Will you dismiss someone who disagrees with you, or cultivate curiosity about why they feel the way they do? Over time, empathic choices add up—building empathic habits and, eventually, empathic people. 35

Adapted from The Greater Good Magazine

Passage 2. Richard Fisher argues on the surprising downsides of empathy.

- 1 As the pandemic pushes us into isolation, culture wars rage, and disinhibited cruelty brews on social media, it feels a little controversial to suggest that empathy has downsides. Yet, in recent years, researchers have found that misplaced empathy can be bad for everyone, leading to exhaustion and apathy, and preventing us from helping the very people we need to. Worse still, people's empathetic tendencies can even be harnessed to manipulate them into aggression and cruelty. So, if not empathy, what should we aim to feel instead? 5

- 2 Detractors may take issue with how empathy is defined as the act of stepping into someone's mind to experience their feelings. Even in this narrow sense, empathy might seem like an obvious force for good. Common sense tells us that experiencing someone else's pain will motivate us to care about and help that person. 10

- 3 However, it leads to some tricky moral dilemmas. People are much more likely to open their hearts – or wallets – when there is a visible beneficiary whose pain could be alleviated. The charity that campaigns with a single story of a named, suffering child may win more donations compared with the charity that deploys statistics describing 1,000 anonymous children.

- 4 There is nothing wrong with using personal stories to raise awareness of a worthy cause, of course, but the identifiable victim effect does nonetheless siphon billions of dollars away from where it could do more good for a greater number of people. If your goal was to help as many children as possible, a dollar spent on deworming programmes in the developing world, for instance, would go significantly further than a dollar donated in the developed world for an expensive medical procedure. It can be even harder to attract attention to problems that have no identifiable victim at all, such as future generations affected by climate change, who do not exist yet. 15 20

- 5 Extending empathy to abstract strangers is a particular challenge for the human mind. Originally described by the Stoics thousands of years ago, the concept of 'oikeiōsis' describes how our empathy and affinity for others declines by proximity to our lives. Imagine a series of rings: in the bullseye there's the self, the innermost ring represents one's family, the next ring one's friends, the next one's neighbours, then one's tribe or community, then one's country, and so on. The problem is when bad actors hijack these "circles of sympathy" to try and sway our behaviours and beliefs. Our natural empathy for those closer and more similar to us can be harnessed to provoke antipathy towards those who are not. 25 30

- 6 Politicians and activists on both sides of the spectrum often play to the idea of 'us and them', deploying empathy and identifiable victims to make a political case. It underpins some social media campaigns to 'cancel' people, allows immigrants to be demonised, and can even stoke hatred and violence against apparent outsiders. Lynchings in the US were sometimes motivated by stories of victims affected by the crimes of black men. 35

- 7 While shared happiness certainly is a very pleasant state, the sharing of suffering can at times be difficult. At its worst, people feel 'empathic distress', which can become a barrier to action. Such distress leads to apathy, withdrawal and feelings of helplessness, and can even be bad for your health. During the pandemic, this sense of empathy fatigue has become of particular concern among care-givers, such as those working in mental health support or hospital doctors and nurses. 40

- 8 So, where does that leave us? Surely feeling no empathy at all is worse? Experts are not suggesting that empathy should be actively discouraged. There are times when stepping into somebody's shoes is a necessary first step towards positive action, care and help for others.

Adapted from BBC Future: Can empathy be bad for you?