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Better Living Through Empathy

How we can improve our ability to understand others.

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We often take a “glass half empty” approach when considering empathy. In popular media and psychology research studies alike, the consequences of a lack of empathy tend to be emphasized. We are warned of the perils of the office narcissist or psychopath who can’t see beyond their own point of view and needs; tantalized by crime shows depicting sadistic murderers who enjoy others’ pain; and frustrated by the directives of politicians that smack of indifference towards their most vulnerable constituents. At other times, we equate empathy with being "soft." In my own work, I focus on what helps us to better understand others. However, this is often in the context of times when we get it wrong, presuming we know how somebody else feels when we probably don’t.

The term empathy generally refers to two main concepts. The first involves the cognitive process of taking another person’s psychological perspective, imagining their thoughts, feelings, and what drives their behaviors. The second, which is often an outcome of this perspective taking, is the experiencing of an emotional reaction to the other person’s situation. This could be feelings of a similar quality (e.g., feeling sad when they are sad) or a reaction to their situation (e.g., feeling compassion because they are sad).

Away from the more dramatic demonstrations of the perils of a lack of empathy, everyday relationships depend on the ability to take other people’s points of view and to understand them. Sharing in the feelings of others also bonds people together. In this post, I want to take a “glass half full” approach, examining the ways in which we can better use our empathy skills, even if we are sometimes prone to errors and pitfalls. The focus will be on the cognitive aspects of empathy. Perspective taking is more of a deliberate process than emotional empathy. That is, we often consciously
call on our perspective-taking skills to understand another person’s situation. It seems, therefore, that this process is most amenable to change, as well as having the potential to increase the concern we feel for others.

**How can we improve our empathy?**

**Imagine yourself in the other person’s shoes.**

One of the main ways we try to understand others is to mentally imagine ourselves in their position. In some ways, we can’t help using our own perspective to appreciate those of other people. Many of the same networks in the brain are activated when either focusing on our own point of view or the point of view of others. In fact, the **perception-action model** posits that when we empathize with another person’s state, we can experience the same involuntary biological processes and bodily sensations as the person whom we are observing.

Across several **studies**, in comparison to participants who are asked to remain objective, participants who take an **imagine-self** perspective experience greater empathic concern and **motivation** to help another person.

Imagining ourselves in the other person’s place needs to be used judiciously. When we do this too much, we may become more **personally distressed** and concerned with our own feelings than those of the very person we are trying to understand. Personal distress makes us less likely to want to engage with the other person’s misfortunes or to help them. Studies also **demonstrate** that when using ourselves as a starting point (or ‘anchor’) to understand another person, we often fail to ‘adjust’ enough away from our own point of view. Therefore, while using our own thoughts as a starting point is useful, we must remember that the other person’s interpretations could be quite different.
Use personal experiences.

We often relate what another person is experiencing to something that we have previously experienced. These may be relationship break-ups, work problems, bereavement, being the victim of a crime, and even painful physical experiences. Thinking of our own past experiences makes it easier to take the point of view of another person who is in a similar situation, particularly when we bring forth those memories while interacting with the other person. An important part of being able to use our past experiences of particularly challenging situations to understand another person involves moving from ruminating on our experiences to developing some insight into what occurred; and being self-compassionate and understanding towards ourselves.

Even when you have experienced something similar and can use this to get into another person's head, resist the urge to tell someone, “I know just how you feel.” We shouldn’t presume that our experiences are an exact duplicate of those of another person. A break-up of a short relationship at a younger age is quite different to the end of a long relationship involving children and financial ties. Once we have “moved on” from a situation such as a break-up, it can be hard to understand a person who is at an earlier stage of processing their experiences.

Take time when angry.

Perspective taking can be “short-circuited” by anger because it is a more complex cognitive process and needs your attention. Even the most empathic person can be undone by anger. If you want to understand someone with whom you are engaged in conflict, step away for a while and wait until the anger subsides. You'll probably find that your initial explanations for their behavior – such as belief that they deliberately hurt you – may not stand up in the cold light of day.
**Really consider the other person’s experiences.**

This sounds obvious, but we don’t always consider where the other person is coming from when we attempt to take their perspective. We tend to consider other people’s actions (particularly negative) as indicating what type of person they are. By contrast, we think our own actions are driven by the situations in which we find ourselves.

Take the example of a person whom you've never met before running into a meeting late, with an untucked shirt and papers falling out of their bag. You’re likely to think they are an untidy, careless, incompetent person. By contrast, when the same thing happens to you, you rationalize your tardiness as being due to your car breaking down, the cat being sick, and so on.

The problem with using our observation at the meeting to decide what “type” of person our colleague is likely to be is that our conclusions are based on limited evidence. Instead, trying to consider situational explanations for the other person’s behavior (e.g., maybe they have a sick cat, too) and not jumping to conclusions until we know more about them is likely to be a better use of our empathy.

**Listen! Listen! Listen!**

Much of the information we need to understand another is given to us by the person, whether it is verbal or through facial expressions and body language. Often, we are so intent on giving advice or coming up with a perfect answer that we miss these cues. When we really listen and ask questions, we are able to clarify what we think may be going on.
Remember what “perspective taking” means.

The role of perspective taking is to help us to understand where another person is coming from or what they are thinking about a situation. Taking someone’s point of view does not mean “taking on” or agreeing with that person’s perspective. You may take another person’s point of view and still feel they are inaccurately interpreting your actions. Or perhaps by taking their perspective, you will find that they did act deliberately to hurt you! However, perspective taking will help you to gain understanding of why they acted in a certain way and it may also breed some compassion for them even when they act inappropriately.

Conclusion

It can be fascinating to focus on extreme inabilities to enter into others' experiences, such as the examples mentioned at the beginning of this post. Empathy can, of course, also be used for ill, such as when people use perspective taking to manipulate and take advantage of the tender-hearted emotions and empathy of others.

Taking a “glass half full” approach to empathy, I think of perspective taking more like a muscle that, for at least a good proportion of the population, can be strengthened. There are good reasons to want to build this muscle. Empathy is demonstrated time and again to be imperative for satisfying intimate relationships, friendships, and casual interactions, as well as having our own needs met and meeting the needs of others. Now isn't that a very powerful skill for everyday life?