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Does Past Experience Increase Empathy?

Similar past experiences can both help and hinder our understanding of others.

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Have you ever told a friend experiencing a troubling situation, “I know *exactly* how you feel”? This response is usually driven by a connection we’ve made with our own similar experiences. Having “been there,” we believe we know what it’s like to be them.

But do we really?

Barack Obama has spoken of the ability to “recognize ourselves in each other.” In 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, “A moment’s insight is sometimes worth a life’s experience.” Both quotes reflect themes psychologists have long grappled with — that is, how we come to understand and process challenging experiences such as relationship breakdowns, the loss of loved ones, or interpersonal conflicts; and, more specific to the research of my colleagues and myself, to what extent we can use these experiences to understand and empathize with others going through similar things.

To address these issues, we need to consider the ways we think about ourselves (*self-reflection*) and the ways we think about others (*perspective taking*).

What Is Self-Reflection?

Self-reflection is turning our attention inward to consider what we are feeling at a given moment, why we acted in such a way, and how our past experiences have shaped us. Surprisingly, we don't reflect on inner experiences as often as might be expected, with our environment usually the focus of our attention.

Some people are more likely than others to reflect upon their experiences; a trait known as *private self-consciousness*. However, self-awareness can be facilitated by anything that makes us the "object" of our perception, such as mirrors, recordings, and being around other people.

People who are more self-aware attribute greater responsibility to themselves for the outcomes of a situation. Their perceptions of their own abilities (e.g., academic skills) are also more consistent with actual benchmarks (e.g., report cards). Interestingly, it is easier to match a person who is high on private self-consciousness with a description they have provided of themselves. It appears that if you are prone to self-reflection, you're more likely to provide better self-descriptions.

How Are Self-Reflection and Understanding Others Related?

While self-reflection helps us to understand ourselves, perspective taking allows us to consider what it's like to be in someone else's situation and to empathize with their experiences. We do this every day, such as when we predict how a driver in the next lane with a different field of vision will behave, or when we console a friend who is discussing their misfortunes.

Self-reflection helps us walk a mile in another's shoes. In studies that facilitate self-awareness (e.g., through a mirror or audio recording), participants are less likely to erroneously believe that another person knows things that only they themselves have experienced. Self-aware participants also demonstrate an understanding of

their own versus another's visual perspective, such as tracing the letter E on their forehead backwards, making it the correct orientation for someone looking at them. However, when we are worried about being evaluated or even just in a hurry to get somewhere, our ability to attend to those around us suffers.

One of the main ways we try to understand another person's experiences is to imagine ourselves in their place and to use our experiences of love and loss to connect with their situation. This process has a neurological basis: Brain regions activated when we focus on our own point of view are also activated when considering that of another person.

Reflecting on a similar situation we've experienced makes it easier to understand another person and can result in empathic concern and compassion for their plight. They also feel more understood if you tell them about your similar experiences. However, we are not always more accurate in predicting their thoughts or feelings, and sometimes we are actually less compassionate or willing to help them, particularly if we are currently experiencing a similar situation.

Having similar experience to another person appears to be only part of the puzzle. It is important to examine *how* we process our past experiences.

What Types of Self-Reflection Help Us to Understand Others?

Researchers believe private self-consciousness is better understood as consisting of two types of reflection: One is driven by curiosity and wanting to know more about what makes us tick (*intellectual self-attentiveness*); the other is *ruminating* on our experiences driven by anxieties and fears of loss.

Rumination involves replaying an event again and again, often with little awareness of why it occurred. While more positive self-reflection or attentiveness is associated with an increased tendency to consider other peoples' points of view, being prone to rumination makes us less able to consider things from other people's perspectives. When we are overly absorbed and concerned with our own misfortunes, it is difficult to shift our attention towards another person and their experiences.

The more a person ruminates, the more they experience an empathic reaction involving anxiety and unease called personal distress. Rather than making us want to connect with another's misfortunes, personal distress usually makes us want to run the other way.

How Should We Think About Our Past Experiences?

Initially, it's normal to play over in our minds negative events, such as a marriage breakdown. But we can become fixated on these experiences, which is associated with depression and anxiety. For our experiences to help us connect with others, we need to move beyond rumination to developing *insight* (understanding) into what has occurred.

The ways we think about past experiences can help or hinder the development of insight. One way is to mentally immerse ourselves in our past experiences — as if we were right back there — focusing on what occurred. This is likely to bring the past to life, but also results in anger and attributing blame to others involved. By contrast, a self-distanced perspective, where we almost picture the situation as a "fly on the wall" leads to focusing on why an experience occurred, which can foster insight and closure.

There is no research directly investigating how self-immersed and self-distanced ways of examining experiences are associated with perspective taking. However, studies indicate that people who reflect on their own problems with self-compassion, which stresses less ruminative thinking and seeing the “bigger picture,” are more prone to engage in perspective taking, feel greater empathic concern for others, and experience less personal distress. Self-compassionate people are also better able to consider their own and others’ needs, and are more likely to forgive and help others.

We Can Never Know "Exactly" How Someone Feels

Self-reflection is essential for understanding our troubling experiences. In turn, this understanding is likely to help us consider others in similar situations.

However, we can’t assume others will experience a situation exactly the way we did, as there are probably differences in the experiences. It can also be difficult to imagine ourselves back in an emotionally charged time in our lives. In certain contexts, especially working as a psychologist or nurse, taking another person’s perspective in a more distant way is advised.

Perhaps, then, rather than telling someone, “I know *exactly* how you feel,” it’s best to ask curious questions that will help you to clarify what they are going through, as well as to help them develop insight into their situation.

This is an extended version of a piece that originally appeared on The Conversation.