

Empathy

The term “empathy” is used to describe a wide range of experiences. Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within the other being's frame of reference (Bellet, Maloney; The importance of empathy as an interviewing skill in medicine). There are many definitions for empathy which encompass a broad range of emotional states. In the development of human empathy, individual differences appear, ranging from no apparent empathic ability or empathy which is harmful to self or others, to well-balanced empathy, including the ability to distinguish between self and other.

'You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.' Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Empathy is the imaginative act of stepping into the shoes of another person and viewing the world from their perspective. That means really trying to understand where someone is coming from – the feelings, beliefs, hopes and experiences that make up their view of the world.

There is a tendency to define empathy on two levels. First there is a conceptual definition of empathy as an attitude (as a way of being with another person). This level includes conditions of warmth, genuineness and empathic listening. These things might be similar or influenced by the moral and emotive components of empathy. These components are emotional. Second, there is an operational level of empathy as a communication skill and it includes the helper’s ability to communicate warmth and genuineness (our capacity to understand the inner world of another person, also cognitive awareness of the other person’s world). These things are cognitive components. (Rogers, 1975)

Contemporary researchers often differentiate between [two types of empathy](#): “Affective empathy” refers to the sensations and feelings we get in response to others’ emotions; this can include mirroring what that person is feeling, or just feeling stressed when we detect another’s fear or anxiety. “Cognitive empathy,” sometimes called “perspective taking,” refers to our ability to identify and understand other peoples’ emotions.

A third type of empathy has been described by researchers operating in the field of emotional intelligence as “compassionate empathy” which is not only understand a person’s point of view and feel with it, but act to help, if needed.

Affective empathy can be subdivided into the following scales:

- Empathic concern: sympathy and compassion for others in response to their suffering
- Personal distress: self-centered feelings of discomfort and anxiety in response to another's suffering. There is no consensus regarding whether personal distress is a basic form of empathy or instead does not constitute empathy. There may be a developmental aspect to this subdivision. Infants respond to the distress of others by getting distressed themselves; only when they are 2 years old do they start to respond in other-oriented ways, trying to help, comfort and share.

Cognitive empathy can be subdivided into the following scales:

- Perspective taking: the tendency to spontaneously adopt others' psychological perspectives
- Fantasy: the tendency to identify with fictional characters

You may also consider empathy as a social-cognitive ability. Then it can be divided into three connected components: perceptive (recognising and interpreting cues), social-cognitive (recognising of thoughts, motives, intentions, attribution of meaning and behaviour) and affective (recognising of emotions).

It is important to understand what empathy is and is not. If you see a homeless person living under a bridge you may feel sorry for him and give him some money as you pass by. That is pity or sympathy, not empathy. If, on the other hand, you make an effort to look at the world through his eyes, to consider what life is really like for him, and perhaps have a conversation that transforms him from a faceless stranger into a unique individual, then you are empathising.

Empathy's qualities are prospective taking, staying out of judgement, recognising emotions in other people and connecting to them.

Empathy is a more popular concept today than at any moment in history. It's on the lips of everyone from the Dalai Lama to relationship counsellors, from business gurus to happiness experts, from political protesters to ecological activists. And it's not surprising, since over the last decade neuroscientists have discovered that 98% of us have empathy wired into our brains. The old story that we are basically selfish, self-interested creatures has been debunked. Our selfish inner drives exist side by side with our empathic other half. We are *homo empathicus*. (Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*).

Empathic response

Human beings are naturally primed to embrace this message; nonetheless, most of us don't tap into their full empathic potential in everyday life. We can easily find ourselves passing by a mother struggling with a pram to a work meeting, or read about a tragic earthquake in a distant country then let it slip our mind as we click a link to check the latest football results.

The good news is that almost everyone can learn to be more empathic by empowering the natural, empathic potential through:

- listening out for people's feelings and needs without interruption;
- developing awareness of individuals around us as human beings;
- becoming curious about the others, especially those who are apparently different from us.

Empathic communication requires to reflect the conversational partner's statements, but this should not be done through literal repetition. Rather we should affirm the content of what's expressed with imagination, acceptance, and genuine understanding. It requires full attention and emotional presence.

Being empathic means to determine whether our understanding of the conversational partner's inner world is correct - whether we are seeing it as she/he is experiencing it at this moment. Each response contains the unspoken question: Is it the way it is in you now?

In this perspective, responses are not only reflections of feelings but more testing understandings.

Therefore, communicating empathetically is not just the technique of reflecting back to the speaker what they say in words; it is struggling to put into words our understanding of the totality of their communication (their words and the other psychological cues we have picked up), and then allowing them to correct what we have understood.