

Why is Empathy important and how we can learn it

Interview by Anna Basiková for Elle magazine

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How do we learn empathy?

Empathy is the ability to co-experience other people's emotions; it is one of our essential life tools, just like emotions themselves. From an evolutionary point of view, our setting as human beings predisposes us to empathize to a great extent. Concerning that, empathy does not need to be explicitly learned. If we are in touch with ourselves on the inside and at the same time in touch with others, it will occur naturally.

What are the principles of being able to empathize with each other's feelings and problems?

It is absolutely crucial to be able to be in touch with our own body and emotions. Unfortunately, many people have learned to ignore or suppress their emotions to avoid pain and unpleasant physical sensations. However, from a long-term perspective, this is not a healthy way to live, as it leads to numbness, both towards yourself and others. And numbness does not really enhance empathy.





Firstly, we need to understand why we, human beings, are equipped with emotions. Not only joy, but also so-called "negative emotions", such as sadness, anger, fear, or shame, play an important role in our lives. And I would point out that it is more complex than just finding the pleasant ones and avoiding the uncomfortable ones.

Emotions help us to "process reality" and restore our bodies to certain homeostasis. It helps us to be prepared for new everyday challenges. At the same time, they give us important feedback about our needs. If we are sad, we probably miss something. If we are angry, we need to define our boundaries. When we are scared, we probably need safety or help.



Last but not least, emotions help us to communicate with each other, both to express our feelings, needs and motives while understanding the feelings, needs and motives of others. For these are primarily emotions, not logical explanations, that help us to understand each other. This takes us back to empathy. Without sharing our emotions and empathizing with each other, we will have a hard time cooperating and agreeing on significant things. The language of emotions is evolutionarily much older than the language of words itself.

What does it say about us if we are not empathetic enough?

It probably says that we grew up in an environment where we did not experience much empathy, and, therefore, had no one to emulate. In some families, sensitivity and vulnerability are perceived as a weakness and sadness is pretended to be non-existent. Feeling someone else's feelings is seen as pointless by some, preferring to give various unwanted advice, or start moralising outright. Thinking and acting like this is a common defence mechanism.

Sometimes people who overestimate logical thinking also show less empathy. They think they can find a solution to everything. They do not realize that sometimes offering solutions just overwhelms the other person and puts even more weight on them. Another reason for poorer empathy can be when I do not take care of my own needs, I then inevitably do not have as much capacity to care about the feelings and needs of others.

Is it good for life to be more empathetic? Or is it not?

I would certainly say yes. Without empathy, there can be no cooperation, kindness, or forgiveness. While the oldest part of the human brain, the brain stem, is strictly responsible for our individual survival, for example, through the fight or flight mechanism, the limbic system – and empathy associated with it – probably serves evolutionarily to enable an entire community to survive and thrive.





And without empathy, no human community, be it a family, group of friends, a group of children, a corporation, country, or an entire civilization cannot thrive either.

What do we do when we overdo the empathy and put others ahead of our own feelings and needs?

Just because I can be empathetic does not mean that I must absolutely agree with the actions of another person or stand against my values. Both empathy and authenticity are significant.

It is useful to be able to sense your own emotions and talk about them. It is good if our conversations are mutually balanced. We talk both about my experience and also about yours. If I forget about myself in the long term, my ability to empathize is likely to suffer as well.

How to be healthily empathetic? So, it suits both us and others.

I am a fan of simple and specific sentences in communication which contain the "label" of the emotion we are experiencing. In workshops and therapy, I call it "emotional language". For example, I felt sad when you were talking about... I felt angry when I heard... I felt fear when you were talking about... I felt joy when... It also helps not to give advice unless you are asked for it directly. Empathetic communication is not about solving the situation; it is about showing the other person that they are not alone. It is also useful to learn how to make a pause and allow silence for a while.

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How do you view people who share posts on social media about injustice in the world? What does it say about us?

I guess it means that we somehow empathize with people who are experiencing hurt and loss. And, that we don't want to ignore when the powerful take advantage of the weak. Us, human beings, if we have enough prosperity and experienced kindness from others while growing up and in adulthood, we also want other people to be happy and prosperous.

We, as a society, still have a long way to go, but we have come a certain way already. Of course, uploading pictures is not enough, but it is a good start. In addition to posting statuses, we also need to vote in elections, keep promoting humanistic values, educate young people, and try to help them to do well economically. Because if someone works 40 hours a week and barely just survives pay check to pay check, then, logically, he or she will not have the capacity to care much about the wellbeing of others. And empathy is about caring about other people.

Sebastian James * 1985, Czech Republic

Sebastian James is a psychologist and facilitator working both for the private and corporate sector. He studied in Europe and the United States and worked for companies such as Novartis, ExxonMobil and PwC. In his work he focuses on authenticity, direct communication, understanding human emotions and needs, expanding body awareness, relaxation and play. Sebastian facilitated personal development workshops in the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, France and Greece and worked with people from over 25 countries.

www.sebastianjames.cz