

Empathy

 *In a recent workshop* on differentiated instruction sponsored by Saint Mary's College as part of their Distinguished Speaker Series, Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson related an incident that took place in one of her schools. It was a place in which children came and left frequently, and many, many languages were spoken (by the children, not necessarily by the staff). A small group of children would get together when a new child came into the room, surround the child, and wait for him or her to speak. When that happened, they would escort the child around the room, meeting other students, until they found someone who spoke the new child's language. Then they could leave the newcomer with their new friend who could orient the new child to the classroom in a familiar language.

Overview

Empathy lies at the core of what it means to be human. Without empathy, we feel disconnected from other people and struggle to confirm our own place in the human family. Being able to empathize is critical, especially in a world where there are so many people with so many different ideas. If we can take a moment to consider other viewpoints, our own become clearer—and are perhaps enriched by ideas that had not occurred to us.

According to Psychology Today’s website, “Empathy is the experience of understanding another person’s thoughts, feelings, and condition from their point of view, rather than from your own. You can imagine yourself in their place in order to understand what they are feeling or experiencing.” A similar definition can be found at the *Greater Good Magazine* site: “Empathy is the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.” Paul Ekman (2010) defines three kinds of empathy—cognitive, emotional, and compassionate. Cognitive empathy is simply understanding another’s feelings. Emotional empathy is described by Daniel Goleman (2010) as “when you physically feel what other people feel, as though their emotions were contagious.” Compassionate empathy extends emotional empathy to the point where one feels he or she must respond and act.

C. Daniel Batson (2009) expands the idea even further. He says, “The term *empathy* is currently applied to more than a half-dozen phenomena” (p. 1). They include conceiving what another is thinking and feeling on a deep level, “feeling distress at witnessing another person’s suffering” (p. 7).

It is heartening to see that many people are exploring empathy and its importance in our daily lives. As social beings, we depend on one another for many things. Without people we trust and care about, our lives would be diminished. We hope you will find information and activities here to enhance yours.

The Real-World Connection

Why is empathy important to, and good for, us? Research suggests empathic people tend to be more generous and concerned with others' welfare, and they also tend to have happier relationships and greater personal well-being. Empathy can also improve leadership ability and facilitate effective communication ("Empathy Quiz," 2018).

Indeed, "To effectively navigate the social world, it is important to understand others, infer their thoughts and feelings, and to effectively connect to their emotional experiences. Put differently, the extent to which one can empathize with others is a key component of a successful social interaction" (Olderbak, Sassenrath, Keller, & Wilhelm, 2014).

Brené Brown distinguishes between sympathy and empathy in her research, which finds that the importance of building connections outweighs our fight or flight responses. Authentic connections are built on empathy, in which people do the work required to understand one another through shared experiences, rather than simply offering advice (even if that advice comes from a place of caring). She says, "Empathy fuels connection; sympathy drives disconnection. Rarely can a response make something better. What makes something better is connection" (The RSA, 2013).

WHERE TO FIND RESOURCES ON EMPATHY



Take a look at these sites to further your understanding of the value of empathy in daily life.

- **Greater Good Website:** *Empathy* (greatergood.berkeley.edu/empathy): Out of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, this website includes information and links to resources on a variety of topics related to well-being, including empathy.
- **Psychology Today Website:** *Empathy* (psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy): This website includes three main sections: All About Empathy, Recent Posts on Empathy, and Empathy Essential Reads.
- **Start Empathy Website** (startempathy.org): You might want to begin with the Start Empathy Toolkit (startempathy.org/resources/toolkit), and then explore other articles and resources.

EMPATHY TRAINING



In her TEDx talk, Dr. Helen Riess explains that “every human being has a longing to be seen, understood, and appreciated.” To that end, she has developed training for medical students and others, using the acronym EMPATHY to remind us what to observe (EMPATH), and the importance of our response based on those observations (Y).

E—Eye contact

M—Muscles of facial expression

P—Posture

A—Affect

T—Tone of voice

H—Hearing the whole person

Y—Your response

For a full explanation, see Dr. Riess’ TEDx Talk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baHrcC8B4WM>

In Roman Krznaric’s article (2012), he cites a shift in the study of how we understand human nature to consider ourselves as “*homo empathicus*, wired for empathy, social cooperation, and mutual aid.” This is good news! We can improve our empathy skills by taking a look at the six habits that empathic people have cultivated.

1. **Habit 1:** Cultivate curiosity about strangers. Wherever they go, empathic people seek to understand those around them. They engage strangers in conversation to better know what the other is thinking. Krznaric says, “Set yourself the challenge of having a conversation with one stranger every week. All it requires is courage” (2012).
2. **Habit 2:** Challenge prejudices and discover commonalities. Looking for common ground rather than holding on to only our own

worldviews allows for deeper understanding of ourselves, and of those with different viewpoints.

3. **Habit 3:** Try another person’s life. It is fairly easy to listen with empathy to another’s views, but the harder road is to challenge oneself to step out of our comfort zone and visit another religion’s church, or (similar to the king who donned peasant’s clothes and walked among his people to get a firsthand view of their thoughts on his governing) put ourselves in the actual position of the person we are trying to understand.

4. **Habit 4:** Listen hard and open up. Actively listen—be present and carefully attend to what another person is saying without jumping in with your own thoughts or experiences. A vital part of listening, according to Krznaric, is responding in an empathetic way by making oneself vulnerable: “Empathy is a two-way street. At its best, it is built upon mutual understanding—an exchange of our most important beliefs and experiences” (2012).
5. **Habit 5:** Inspire mass action and social change. When enough people share empathy toward a person or cause, changes can occur. One idea is to cultivate connection through social media to build empathy, and thus movement toward action and positive outcomes.
6. **Habit 6:** Develop an ambitious imagination. Pretend you are a member of a group or organization to which you are opposed. What does it feel like to look through their eyes? How might that understanding build a bridge for a conversation, an action step, or finding common ground? Initiatives such as Roots of Empathy (Gordon, 2011) and the Toolkit for Promoting Empathy (Borowsky, 2015) suggest ways to help students grow their empathy. As adults who model empathy, we are the most powerful advocates for its practice.

According to Krznaric, “The 20th century was the Age of Introspection, when self-help and therapy culture encouraged us to believe that the best way to understand who we are and how to live was to look inside ourselves. But it left us gazing at our own navels. The 21st century should become the Age of Empathy, when we discover ourselves not simply through self-reflection, but by becoming interested in the lives of others. We need empathy to create a new kind of revolution. Not an old-fashioned revolution built on new laws, institutions, or policies, but a radical revolution in human relationships” (2012).

We have opportunities all around us to pay attention to Krznaric’s observation. For self-care, for well-being, for a better world locally and globally, building empathy offers paths to understanding and cooperation in a fractured world.

Technology and Empathy

You may have heard of cyber vigilantism—the use of online tools to take the law into one’s own hands through virtual means. The term *digilante* has been coined to refer to someone who engages in this behavior. Well-known examples include groups such as Wikileaks and Anonymous, as well as individuals such as Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, and Julian Assange. These people and groups have taken it upon themselves to find and release information that makes confidential (and often illegal) activities public. Regardless of whether you think their actions are acceptable, they have circumvented societal systems intended to protect people and institutions.

An increasingly common form of cyber vigilantism is online shaming. Supporters claim online shaming brings people to justice, but more often than not, innocent people suffer or the consequences meted out far exceed the supposed transgression. For example, in August of 2017, Kyle Quinn, an assistant professor at the University of Arkansas was enjoying a quiet evening with his wife. Unbeknownst to him, a group of white supremacists were gathering in Charlottesville, Virginia. Photos of this group were posted online, and someone identified one of the participants as Kyle Quinn. In very short order, people who did not know him were shaming Quinn on social media sites, sending aggressive messages to his work email, and leaving threatening messages on his work voicemail. The actual person in the photo was later identified, but by that time, Quinn and his wife feared for their personal safety (Pogue, 2017).

Ready access makes it easy for people to shame one another online. Most people carry mobile devices capable of snapping photos or recording videos that are easily uploaded to social media sites. In the past we might have observed inappropriate behavior, pointed it out to the friend walking next to us, and kept going on our way. Now we can document the behavior and share it with millions of people in seconds—people who may decide the person’s behavior warrants some kind of punishment.

Another factor is something called the “toxic disinhibition effect,” which describes how people are willing to say and do things online they would never do in real life, such as shame someone they do not

know or engage in other mob-like behaviors (Suler, 2004). Educators and students often have a very strong sense of right and wrong or fairness. This quality is often benign, but under the right circumstances, it can lead them to engage in online shaming. As a result, it is important for members of the school community to be aware of, and guard against, the temptation to participate in online shaming.

Because it is so easy to ruin someone's reputation by spreading lies, a call for empathy can curtail a disastrous situation. Applying common sense, placing ourselves in another's shoes, and asking if it helps the common good to forward hurtful stories will help build our own habits of empathy and ultimately make the world a safer, kinder place.

A number of websites provide starting places for exploring personal empathy. Take *Greater Good Magazine's* Empathy Quiz, in which you are presented with a series of statements and indicate how much (or little) they apply to you. At the end, you are given a score, along with some suggestions for improving empathy, such as "practice active listening," "share in other people's joy," "look for commonalities with others," "read fiction," and "pay attention to faces."

Another online resource is the Reading the Mind in the Eyes test. Created by Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, director of the Autism Research Centre at the University of Cambridge, initially to identify autism, the online version of the test provides you with the opportunity to choose the emotion a person is feeling by viewing only their eyes in a series of photographs. At the end, you are given a score that can be compared to scores of people who are considered good at reading others' emotions. You can take the test online: questionwritertracker.com/quiz/61/Z4MK3TKB.html.

Paul Ekman's work on micro-expressions (2018) can help us consider our impressions of others with as little information as is given through their eyes. Learning online about the quick assumptions we make about other people in an online test can help us pause a moment as we consider our encounters with others in daily life.

Kathleen Morris (2018) suggests that creating opportunities for students to blog builds empathy. We can take her advice as adults, and build relationships through blogging with colleagues and like-minded

people throughout the world. Her “netiquette” points apply to all of us. While blogging:

1. give compliments
2. deliver feedback constructively
3. ask questions and engage in conversation
4. be a reliable online friend
5. stay relevant and on-topic
6. avoid ambiguous communication (e.g., ALL CAPS could be interpreted as shouting)

Building and enhancing our own empathic abilities are crucial to living a meaningful and connected life. Rebecca Detrick (2017) sums it up: “An adult who understands that by building human connections and being open to understanding the experiences of others, a person’s life will be richer, their support systems expansive, and their goals broader and achievable” (p. 7).

Activities

Here are several activities that help focus on empathy. The idea is to clarify your own thoughts on a topic while considering other points of view. Six of these activities are individual; two will work with more than one person. The first seven of these can be adapted for a variety of situations in which children work in pairs or small groups, while the eighth activity can be interesting in a whole-group setting.

1. **Find common ground:** One way to explore another’s viewpoint is to invite a friend, colleague, or family member to share a discussion with you. Together, pick a topic you are both interested in exploring. It could be a personal issue, or a topic in the news. Each person writes down his or her thoughts about the topic and shares their thoughts, which allows both parties to see patterns and common areas of concern or interest. Online collaboration tools allow for sharing ideas asynchronously.
2. **Walk in someone’s shoes, part 1:** Recall an incident in which someone did or said something that you did not understand. In your journal, write your response to the incident and your

Activity 1 FINDING COMMON GROUND: Online Tools

- **Online collaboration tools:** Google Docs (docs.google.com) and Microsoft 365 (office.com) offer settings where you can create a file and share it with others. Perhaps you want to have a conversation with a colleague about a new activity idea that is very different from what has been done previously, but there is not time to get together in person. Create an online file and share it with your colleague! You can both enter your thoughts; consider dating each entry so you can see how the conversation evolves. Entries can be color-coded for easy identification of the writer. Hopefully, this exchange will not take the place of a face-to-face discussion, if that is feasible. However, it can provide a space where thinking and consideration can take place to lay the foundation for an in-person conversation. It also provides an opportunity for both parties to see where their thoughts meet and where there is a disconnection.
- **Online collaboration tools:** Mind Mapping is one way to organize your thoughts and create a visual representation of them. Both MindMeister (mindmeister.com) and Coggle (coggle.it) offer free options for creating mind maps, and both allow for building mind maps collaboratively.

Activity 2 WALK IN SOMEONE'S SHOES: Online Tools

- **Traditional tales retold:** By reading and thinking about traditional stories, we build empathy. Stories create a bridge between the teller or writer and the listener or reader. Research some of your favorite stories to find variations from different parts of the world, and write your thoughts about the differences; focus on how empathetic (or not) a particular character feels in the different versions. Share your thoughts with a friend or colleague, through social media, Google Docs, or other formats.
- **Digital personal expression:** At StoryCenter (storycenter.org), you can create a digital story using your voice, images, music, and other effects. My Hero Project (myhero.com) features written stories, short films, and artwork created by children and adults from around the world. Contributing to sites such as these, as well as viewing the contributions, can lead to interesting discussions and deeper understanding of the creators and their subjects.

- assumptions about it. After you have finished, consider the possible point of view of someone else in the incident. Retell the story in your journal from the other person's point of view.
3. **Walk in someone's shoes, part 2:** Retell or rewrite in your journal a familiar folk or fairy tale from the perspective of a character other than the traditional one. For example, "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" could be told from the point of view of the troll, the bridge, or the grass.
 4. **Dilemma stories, part 1:** Dilemma stories are those in which there are a number of possible outcomes. Read "The Cow-tail Switch" (available online at westafrikanoralliterature.weebly.com/the-cow-tail-switch.html). Think about which son should be given the cow-tail switch; share your reasons in your journal, or with a partner. Challenge yourself to consider another recipient—what reasons might another son be given the prize?
 5. **Dilemma stories, part 2:** "Jack and the Beanstalk" is a familiar tale. Tell, listen to, or read the story. Then think about Jack on a continuum. Is he a hero or a villain? Where would you place him? Share reasons for your position in your journal.
 6. **Listen to me!** In this activity, a pair works together. One person has 30 seconds to tell the story of a personal incident that happened recently. Then the listener has 60 seconds to retell the same story *as if it happened to them*, (i.e., in the first person). The pair talks about what difference it made for the listener to have more time to tell the story, then they switch roles.
 7. **Telephone:** This traditional activity still teaches the value of listening carefully to build empathy. A group of people stands in a circle, and one person whispers a message to the person next to her. That person then repeats the same message to the next person, and so on, until the message has gone all the way around the circle. Inevitably, the final message is totally different from the one that was started, or at the very least, is a garbled version of it. The group splits into partners and talks about why they think the message changed. How does empathy between teller and listener factor into what is heard and conveyed? What precautions can we take to make sure our own messages are accurately heard and understood?

8. **Were you ever:** Consider this activity for a staff meeting. Designate a “yes” side of the room and a “no” side. Suggest a series of questions and have people stand on one side of the room or the other, based on whether they have experienced the situation (e.g., Were you ever denied employment because of your gender?). Talk with others on your side of the room. Continue asking questions. If yes, move to the other side of the room; if no, stay put. Talk with others near you. You might conclude the series with the questions: Have you ever seen a situation where someone was discriminated against because of their age? and Have you been asked to intervene in such a situation? Share experiences.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think empathy is an important skill to cultivate?
2. How can you increase the practice of empathy?
3. Is it easier to be empathetic to friends or family? Why?
4. What is one way you can use technology to foster empathy?
5. What will you do today to increase empathy in your life?

Additional Resources

- “Are We Entering an Age of Empathy?” *Neuro Research Project: NeuroNotes*, Ray Williams, March, 2012. neuroresearchproject.com/2012/03/14/greed-is-out-empathy-is-in
- “Building Blocks for Digital Citizenship” [Cyber Vigilantism tab], Susan Brooks-Young & Dan Morris. livebinders.com/play/play?id=53885&backurl=/shelf/my
- “The Classroom Versus the Computer: Or, Can You Learn Communication Skills behind a Screen?” Marie Bryson, January 18, 2018. tinyurl.com/y9v6un9v
- Factitious* [online game], Jolt & AU Game Lab, 2018. factitious.augamestudio.com
- “Micro Expressions,” Paul Ekman Group, 2018. paulekman.com/resources/micro-expressions