

Empathy can be learned

How to strengthen it — and
protect yourself from too much of it



EMPATHY CAN BE LEARNED

INTRODUCTION

Empathy is a key 21st century leadership skill (and foundational in many out of work contexts), however many clients I work with know that they are not naturally empathetic and wonder what they can do about it. Can they build their empathy skills or are they fixed?

Others are naturally highly empathetic, to the point of taking on other people's emotions, and this is also problematic. How do you protect yourself from an avalanche of emotions from others?

It is best to think of empathy on a continuum, some people are naturally more empathetic than others, but our position on the continuum isn't fixed. There are things that we can do to strengthen empathy. Contrary to earlier research, we now know that empathy is a skill which, with practice, can be learned/strengthened^{2,4}

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DEFINING EMPATHY

Let's start by defining empathy as, contrary to popular belief, empathy is not one-dimensional. When asked to define empathy most people talk about the ability to put themselves in another person's shoes. Teresa Wiseman¹ an early thought leader in the area, describes empathy as:

- being able to take the perspective of others
- staying out of judgement
- recognising emotion in others; and
- communicating back our understanding of the emotion we see

Empathy is usually described in three categories:

- Cognitive Empathy
- Emotional/Affective Empathy
- Empathetic Concern

For those of us who consider ourselves 'not very good at empathy', cognitive empathy is a good place to start. Cognitive Empathy refers to an intellectual awareness of what other people are feeling. It is about being able to take the perspective of the other person. One way to think about it is how would I feel in the same situation that is being described to me?

Emotional (or Affective) Empathy is more about noticing and then feeling the other person's feelings, e.g. I can see that the other person is feeling [insert emotion, e.g. sad, frustrated, happy, fearful, anxious etc]. I too have felt that feeling and know what it was like for me, I can connect with them on that feeling.

Empathic Concern is when we feel compassion towards the other person and are mobilised to help them.

The differences can be illustrated with this simple example.

Imagine that you're having lunch with a friend when they get a phone call. You don't know who they're talking to, but at some point, your friend starts to cry. As you see your friend break down, you might start to feel lousy yourself. Taking on their feelings (emotional empathy) is that vicarious sharing of what someone else is going through. Instead, you

might try to figure out what they're feeling and why (cognitive empathy). And if you're a good friend, you probably care about what they're going through and wish for them to feel better and would go out of your way to help (empathic concern or compassion).⁴

TECHNIQUES FOR STRENGTHENING EMPATHY

Being conscious of the need to be more empathetic is a great (and necessary) first step. Interestingly the next most important step is to *change your attitude to empathy*. Research has shown that believing that empathy is not a trait, and that it is something you can learn, motivates people to work harder at it, which in turn strengthens empathy⁴.

Try out some or all of the strategies below to build your empathy skills:

- **Pay attention.** Really listen, and get curious – ask yourself the question “what is going on for this person?” What is the emotion behind their story?
- **Communicate your understanding.** Trying to communicate your understanding of what you are seeing/hearing from the other person can be difficult for many. One approach is to ask the question directly, e.g. “I can see that you are really [angry/sad/anxious over this...] am I reading that right?” Or if you are unsure of what you are seeing ask “help me understand how you are feeling at this moment”. If you are someone who is naturally empathetic, this may feel ridiculous – “I can tell that they are angry, I don’t need to ask!” – but sometimes we get it wrong, I may seem angry but that is because I am really fearful. Fear is the emotion to connect with, not anger. By saying it out loud we give the other person a chance to correct our assumption.
- **Try not to judge.** Making assumptions or jumping to judgement too early is a major blocker to building empathy. Consider asking yourself, “why do we see this situation differently” and then remind yourself that there is usually never ‘one right way’ or ‘one view’. Much about empathy boils down to our willingness to learn and challenge our inbuilt assumptions and automatic reactions.
- **Expand your experience.** We often surround ourselves with, or find ourselves in the company of, people who are like us (deliberately or otherwise). There are many understandable reasons for this, but instead go out of your way to engage in conversations with people who are not like you³ – adopting a curious mindset and really listening and asking questions to expand your understanding. Alternatively have a conversation with someone with whom you disagree – instead of debating the issue, try instead to share your story of how you came to form your opinion and then listen to how they arrived at theirs⁴.
- **Don’t try to fix the problem or offer advice.** Often our first reaction to someone who is experiencing challenging emotions is to want to jump in and fix things in an effort to ‘make things better’⁵. Instead force yourself to hold back on the advice and give space for the other person to talk through what they are feeling. Asking the question, “how can I best help you right now?” can be really helpful in stopping ourselves from going into advice mode and reminding ourselves that right now we need to listen and, even if it goes against your instinct, then doing what the person asks. If the person says “I don’t know” then ask them to tell you more about the situation. With time, the intensity of the emotion is likely to subside at which time perhaps together you can come up with some ideas.
- **Switch roles and imagine.** Try to imagine what it is like to be them by remembering when you felt the same emotion. If they are expressing anxiety or fear, think about when you felt that? What did others do in that moment that helped you? Don’t offer it out loud (that’s in the fixing it category), instead use it as a way to connect.

Try these techniques to strengthen empathy

- Change your attitude to empathy
- Pay attention, listen and get curious
- Communicate your understanding
- Try not to judge
- Expand your experience
- Don’t try to fix the problem or provide advice
- Switch roles and imagine

PROTECTING YOURSELF FROM TOO MUCH EMPATHY?

Some people are highly attuned to the emotions of others to the point that it can be overwhelming. Our bodies respond to the other person and their emotional experience and if that becomes too great, it can get in the way of us being compassionate and empathetic and can potentially cause us burnout. It can also be hard to unwind, if we are constantly carrying the emotions of others. If this is you, try the following:

- Make sure that you find some time for yourself where you aren't bombarded by everyone else's feelings. This might be going for a walk in nature, or through music or meditation; anything that helps you reset.
- Ensure that you have clear boundaries (which is likely especially difficult if you are highly empathic). Signal your boundaries to others and practise 'holding the line' when you feel yourself tempted to step in and help (especially when you know that it will likely overload you).
- Be selective about who you spend time with. If at all possible, try to steer clear of people who consistently drain your resilience because of the emotions you tend to carry for them.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the difference between empathy and sympathy?

Sympathy is feeling for other people, it is looking in from the outside and commenting on what the other person just told you and then moving on (often to their story or into problem solving mode). For example, you tell someone that you are worried that you might lose your job in the latest round of cost-cutting, and the other person replies with something like "I'm sorry to hear that, I am sure that you will find something else if you do". To quote Brené Brown⁵ "empathy drives connection, sympathy tends to drive disconnection".

Is sharing your own story an empathetic approach?

For most people when we have just shared our story with someone, to hear their own story back doesn't help and can often make it worse, no matter that their intention was to try and empathise by showing us that they too have been in the same/similar position. That said, we need remember that we all think and process information differently and be conscious of this as you respond. One example, based on my research and experience, suggests people with ADHD tend to share their own stories as a way of empathising. With two ADHDers this can be a really helpful conversation, however when the conversation is happening between someone who is neurodiverse and a neurotypical, it can be problematic in both directions. A neurotypical may feel like their initial sharing of their situation hasn't been heard or valued, and this in turn can drive disconnection. Similarly, when an NT tries to empathise with someone who has ADHD and they don't offer any of their own experience, this can be really unhelpful. Most of the time we won't know, so a useful starting point is to get curious, listen and if in doubt ask, e.g. "I have had a similar experience; would it be helpful if I shared it?" and then follow their cue.

How do you empathise with someone whose values don't align with yours?

It is really important to underscore that being empathetic doesn't mean you have to agree with the person or with what they have done or described to you. For our own well-being, and in fact to help the other person, we have to stay connected to our own values. Empathy is not about connecting to the experience; it is connecting to the emotions that underpin the experience. When someone is sharing something with us that we don't agree with or 'would never do/say/believe' we need to watch for their emotions. How are they feeling as they are telling you this, then connect with that feeling. If they are angry/sad/worried..., connect with when you feel angry. How do you want others to behave towards you when you feel these emotions, what do you want others to do or say? Try responding with that and remember that rarely in these situations do we want advice (at least not initially).

What do I do when I don't have a comparable emotion to draw from?

Many of us, for a wide range of reasons, either don't feel emotions strongly or we block one or more kind of emotion, e.g. "I don't do anger". So, what do we do when we know what we are seeing in the other person, but can't access that

same emotion in ourselves? Here we have to rely on our knowledge of what that emotion looks and feels like for others. Do some research and/or ask people you trust to describe the emotion in question. Over time and with practice, we can become skilled at noticing emotions in others even if we rarely experience them ourselves.

What do I do if I am someone who shies away from strong emotions of any kind?

For many of us facing someone who is very angry or who is crying etc. can be a very uncomfortable situation; one that we either want to avoid or one where we don't know what to do. For context, I am describing a situation where someone else is describing their experience of something to you, not where they are directing the emotion at you. And herein lies the key. This is where perspective taking and staying out of judgement is critical. Everyone has a range of emotional responses, and while what we do with the emotion may be unhealthy or inappropriate, the emotion itself is a valid response. For example, someone gets angry over something. The anger response is a normal human response. We need to accept that this is their response, and while it isn't ours, it is valid for them. Once we can pull back on our judgement of the other person, and adopt an observer stance, we are more likely to be able to hold the space for the other person, allow them to feel heard, and be better equipped to enquire about how they are feeling thus demonstrating empathy, and ultimately to help them (which may include ensuring that their behaviours as a result of their emotion don't hurt others).

Good luck! I would love to hear from you if these strategies helped you or if you have other strategies that could help people grow their empathy skills.

*If you have any questions or would like to learn more, do not hesitate to contact me, Liane Kemp at
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NOTES:

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