

Empathy – Caring for Others Is Good for You

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Empathy has complex neurological underpinnings that control the way our brains help us to care about other people
- › Humans have “mirror neurons” that react to others’ emotions and reproduce them; a deficit in mirror neuron receptors has been suggested as an explanation for narcissism and neurotic behaviors
- › Practicing empathy may help you relieve stress, strengthen your relationships and have a more satisfying work life

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Empathy, the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes, so to speak, and understand their feelings and point of view, is a character trait that may benefit society and individuals in multiple ways. Empathy training has been found to **reduce stress levels** among medical students facing intense emotional encounters with patients, for example.¹

While many parents try to instill empathetic qualities in their children, there’s growing research that empathy has deep neurological roots in humans.

One of the first signs that empathy may be ingrained in all of us occurred in 1848, when a foreman named Phineas Gage working on a railroad construction project had an accident, which resulted in an iron rod going through his skull. He survived, but not

without marked changes to his personality. His friends, family and physician described him as rude and inconsiderate following the accident.²

The Neurological Side of Empathy

The term empathy didn't come to be for another six decades after Gage's accident, but what the accident essentially took from the foreman was the ability to feel empathy. In 1994, researchers were able to take measurements from Gage's skull and use modern neuroimaging techniques to recreate the accident and determine its effects on his brain.

"The damage involved both left and right prefrontal cortices in a pattern that, as confirmed by Gage's modern counterparts, causes a defect in rational decision making and the processing of emotion," researchers concluded.³

Injury was found to have occurred in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), which is one of 10 brain regions now known to be involved in empathy. In his book, "Zero Degrees of Empathy," Simon Baron-Cohen, a clinical psychologist and a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, describes the complex neurological underpinnings of empathy, revealing the many ways our brains help us to care about other people:⁴

- The medial frontal cortex has been linked to social cognition, which allows people to be part of a social group and process information about others.⁵
- The inferior frontal gyrus (IFG) may be involved in recognizing emotions on faces.⁶
- More activity in the IFG when people look at emotional expressions is linked to higher scores on the empathy quotient scale.⁷
- The amygdala is also involved in emotions, including the ability to recognize fear on someone's face.⁸
- Neurons in the caudal anterior cingulate cortex (cACC) "light up" when you're in pain or when you observe someone else in pain.⁹

Humans also have “mirror neurons,” which, Psychology Today explains, “react to emotions expressed by others and then reproduce them.”¹⁰ A deficit in mirror neuron receptors has been suggested as an explanation for narcissism and neurotic behaviors and thinking.¹¹

Despite this knowledge, Baron-Cohen said in a Medical News Today report, “We still know very little about individual differences in empathy ... We will need elegant experimental research to solve those puzzles.”¹²

Why It's Beneficial to Practice Empathy

Beyond stress relief, why is it so important to be empathetic? Chad Fowler, CTO of 6Wunderkinder, the maker of Wunderlist mobile app, shared the following reasons why he believes your most important skill is empathy:¹³

You will be more likely to treat the people you care about the way they wish you would treat them.

You will better understand the needs of people around you.

You will more clearly understand the perception you create in others with your words and actions.

You will understand the unspoken parts of your communication with others.

You will better understand the needs of your customers at work.

You will have less trouble dealing with interpersonal conflict both at home and at work.

You will be able to more accurately predict the actions and reactions of people you interact with.

You will learn how to motivate the people around you.

You will more effectively convince others of your point of view.

You will experience the world in higher resolution as you perceive through not

only your perspective but the perspectives of those around you.

You will find it easier to deal with the negativity of others if you can better understand their motivations and fears.

Yet, people tend to feel most empathetic about those they perceive to be the most vulnerable. In one study, empathetic feelings were higher toward a child, a puppy and an adult dog than they were toward an adult man.¹⁴

There's good reason, however, to reframe the way you may compartmentalize empathetic feelings, as they have the potential to do good in an endless number of scenarios. Among dentists and their patients, for example, empathy improved communication and the dentistry experience for both the patient and the practitioner.¹⁵

Researchers found that empathy was positively associated with treatment adherence, patient satisfaction and reduced dental anxiety, sentiments that seem to be echoed among medical practitioners. Among adolescents, empathy may even go hand in hand with future success, according to licensed professional counselor Ugo Uche:¹⁶

“Teenagers who are empathetic tend to be more purpose driven and they intentionally succeed in their academics not because they are looking to make good grades, but in most subjects their goal is to understand the subject material and to utilize the knowledge as one of their ever-increasing tools ...

Teenagers who are more empathetic do a much better job in embracing failure, because there is little ego involved in their tasks, and setbacks while disappointing are rarely seen as failures, but rather as a learning experience about an approach that does not work for the task at hand.”

Different Types of Empathy

Empathy comes in three different varieties, and we each have varying levels of each type, which combine to influence our personal and professional lives. Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D., the Henry R. Kravis professor of leadership and organizational psychology and former director of the Kravis Leadership Institute at Claremont McKenna College, explained each type in brief:¹⁷

1. **Cognitive empathy** – This type allows you to understand another person's perspective and imagine what it would be like to walk in their shoes.
2. **Personal distress** – Sometimes referred to as social empathy, this allows you to literally feel another person's emotional state.
3. **Empathic concern** – This describes not only recognizing and feeling in-tune with another person's emotional state but also showing the appropriate concern or trying to help them as a result.

It's common for one person to be high in one type of empathy and lower in others, with varying effects. Riggio described a study he worked on in which hospice nurses performed better when they possessed empathic concern but worse when they experienced personal **distress**.

"We surmised that if hospice nurses felt their patients' pain (and family members' distress as well), it made them less able to do their job of providing comfort to the patient and family because they had their own emotions that they had to deal with," Riggio wrote.¹⁸

By tuning into your own empathic abilities, you can make mental notes of when perhaps you should show more empathic concern in lieu of personal distress and vice versa. Psychologist Daniel Goleman (who's behind the theory of emotional intelligence) has stated that possessing all three types of empathy is key to strengthening your relationships.¹⁹

You Can Learn To Be More Empathetic

Because we're all hard-wired to feel empathy, you can train yourself to be more empathetic, even when it comes to strangers. Lack of empathy is responsible for many human conflicts, particularly those that occur between people from different nationalities and cultures. A University of Zurich study showed, however, that even a few positive experiences with a stranger increase empathetic brain responses toward them.

Participants were divided into two groups (in-group members and out-group members) and received shocks to the back of their hands. Other study participants had the option of paying money so someone else could avoid the painful experience.²⁰ When a person received help from a stranger, they had an increased brain response in empathy toward that person. According to the researchers, “[S]urprisingly few positive learning experiences are sufficient to increase empathy.”²¹

Beyond making an effort to share positive experiences with the people around you, you can develop your empathy simply by listening intently when people speak.

This includes waiting until they've finished speaking to formulate your response and respond, as well as considering the speaker's motivations behind what they're saying and then responding with follow-up questions to further your understanding of the conversation.²² Other steps you can take to become more empathetic include:

- **Consider an ongoing disagreement** you have with a family member, friend or coworker. Try to imagine the argument from their side and recognize whether they have valid arguments, good intentions or positive motivations you may have previously missed.
- **Read more fiction** – Reading literary fiction was shown to enhance a skill known as the theory of mind, which is the ability to understand others' mental states and show increased empathy.²³
- **Watch and wonder** – Fowler recommends an activity he calls “watch and wonder,” which you can try virtually anywhere:²⁴

“Put down your cell phone. Instead of checking Twitter or reading articles while you wait for the train or are stuck in a traffic jam, look at the people around you

and imagine who they might be, what they might be thinking and feeling, and where they are trying to go right now. Are they frustrated? Happy? Singing? Looking at their phones? Do they live here or are they from out of town? Have they had a nice day? Try to actually wonder and care.”

If you're unsure when to really try to tap into your empathic abilities, Guy Winch, Ph.D., suggests prime times include whenever you wish you could understand someone better, when you're having an unproductive argument with your significant other or when you want to calm your temper or better connect with the emotions of a loved one. Empathy even comes into play when you need to complain effectively.

“Empathy comes more naturally to some than it does to others,” Winch says. “However, by taking time to truly paint a picture of what it is like for the other person and imagine ourselves in their place, we will gain valuable insights and forge deeper connections to those around us.”²⁵

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