

## Empathy I

Basic features of empathy. Why you need it; what it does for you.

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“Normal people have an incredible lack of empathy.”—Temple Grandin

I’ve been trying to think about empathy but nothing happens, so I’ve been reading about it, hoping I would learn. Now I’m ready to talk about it because I’ve learned. I’ve learned that no one knows anything about it, so my ignorance need not hold me back.

There’s a colloquial definition of empathy as feeling what other people feel. That might get you somewhere if you knew what other people feel, but how could you? What if I say that I feel what you

feel and you say you feel what I feel, are we empathizing? What if you're feeling blue and I'm feeling green and we describe them both the same way? And what is "feeling" anyway?

A step closer is to say that when I act like you feel, then I'm empathizing. When a person is acting fully and honestly, then that is generally good enough, but now our experience is based on being authentic and honest, and how well defined are those? As it turns out, authenticity and honesty are poorly defined and, consequently, empathy is poorly understood.

## Two Sides of the Same Coin?

They say there are two kinds of empathy: emotional and cognitive. Emotional empathy is the feeling part. Having emotional empathy will lead you to act like another person. You will feel their pain, elation, or indifference.

Cognitive empathy is the understanding part. Having cognitive empathy will lead you to have understand the thoughts, meanings, and implications that are in another person's mind. They even tell us that these two kinds of emotions can be seen in the structure of the brain.

I would like to say that a bigger crock of poo there never was, but that's not true either. Most of the claims of states of mind being visible in structure of the brain are equally nonsense. I'll accept that certain fundamental aspects of fear are managed by the amygdala, but emotions appear to be distributed throughout the brain and I see no reason to believe thoughts and feelings can or should be mechanically segregated.

Nevertheless, if we ignore the prevailing claims to substantiate confused theories of mind with misunderstood pictures of the brain, we still have something to consider. Some aspects of thoughts can be verbalized, and most aspects of feelings cannot be.

There is a discernible difference between similarity in thinking and similarity in feeling. It is possible that in some cases, under some conditions, if you think long and hard enough the thoughts of another, then you might start to have a glimmer of how they feel. The trouble is that most of the time this doesn't work.

You can as easily create a picture in your mind that represents the picture in another person's mind as you can take a photograph. A poor photograph will not capture the essence of what there is to see, but a good one might. And if you also happen to feel what another person feels, then you'll be more likely to create a good picture of it.

But you also can learn to take good pictures using a formula, just the way you can learn to paint a good landscape using a formula. It won't be a great picture, but it will be good enough to get the job done. And that brings us to the bottom line: face to face with what empathy is really about. It's about getting the job done.

The job is the communication of shared experience. If you're 100% empathetic then you are the other person. You are there and you will act like them, feel what they feel, and think what they think. You must have all three: actions, feelings, and thoughts.



## Heroes

People who put themselves at risk to display what we hold to be the best aspects of character are called heroes, but are these people really thinking along the same lines as you and I? Probably not. Probably, they're not thinking clearly at all, they're simply acting in the way they've been trained: to act heroically.

Firepeople, soldiers, and emergency responders can do heroic things. They won't have a good explanation for their actions aside from saying that what they did was the right thing to do. These people are acting as we would like to act, but they're not thinking as we would think. They're probably not thinking about their own safety much at all.

When other people act in support of our feelings without consideration of their own, it's heroic. If you considered doing this yourself, you'd probably consider yourself stupid. These people share our feelings but not our thoughts. They don't act out of emotion, they act out of training, reflex, or intellect. They are not motivated by empathy.



## **The Anti-hero**

Psychopaths are, almost by definition, experts at empathetic thoughts. If they're not, then they don't deserve to wear the badge of psychopathy and they're just confused. A psychopath can really appear to know what you think and what you will think, and that skill enables them to both survive, manipulate the situation, and avoid detection.

Psychopaths are eventually exposed because they don't follow through with all the actions that are expected. Instead, they go off at right angles, do something completely incongruous, and blow their cover. At least, they would blow their cover if people understood their aberrant behavior was intentional. This doesn't mean they understand, it just means they have their reasons.

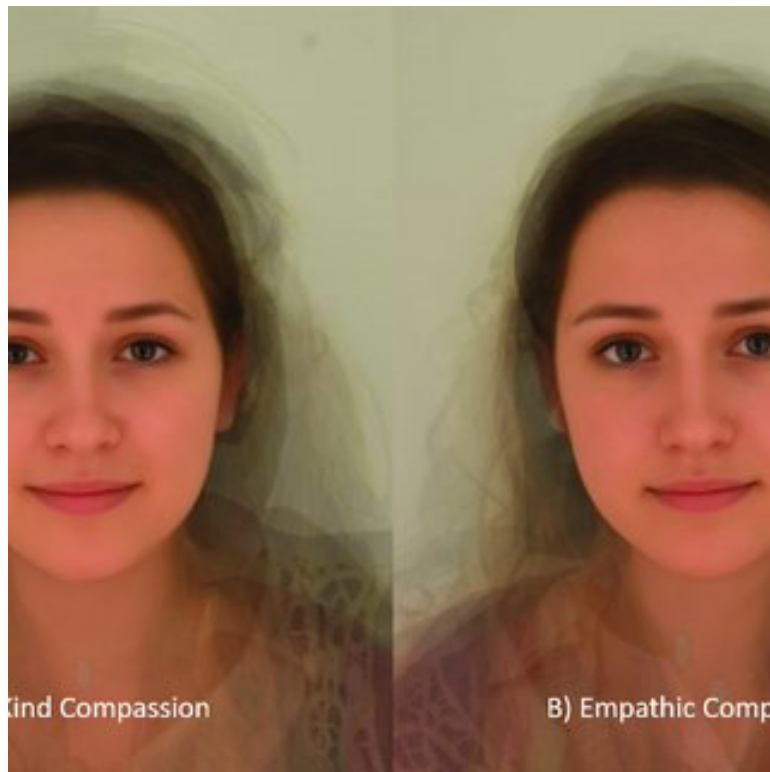
Psychopaths are chameleons, we'd like to believe what we see, and we're easily misled by excuses. We cannot believe that another person would be so disingenuous or malicious as to say the right thing and do the wrong thing, so we believe the excuses.

Many people are disingenuous, and some are very much so. The use of excuses hides a lot of underlying dysfunction. We should smarten up to the prevalence of psychopathy, and understanding empathy is a good place to start.

## **Alexithymia**

This funny word refers to someone who doesn't have feelings. Psychopaths don't have feelings, so they're alexithymic, but they know how to think thoughts that make them seem like they do. That's what distinguishes the psychopath from the alexithymic. The alexithymic has neither. They really don't get it.

You know you're in the presence of an alexithymic because they'll give you a blank stare and they won't move, inflect, or attend in the right manner. You can't argue, cajole, explain your feelings or actions to an alexithymic. If your thoughts are based on how you feel, then they are not going to agree with you. They'll only appreciate, understand, and agree with reasoning that is congruent with their own. A lot of judges are probably alexithymic. Of course, a good combat soldier would be also.



## Sympathy

Empathy remains difficult to define, but sympathy is much more tractable. Sympathy is when a person shares part of the thoughts and feelings of another, but not all of them and not the same ones. Feeling and thinking are present, but not shared.

In my Canadian town, white folks believe in reconciliation between indigenous cultures and themselves, the European invaders. They think and feel that reconciliation can be achieved by allaying their sense of guilt, and that this will exonerate them from the sympathy they feel for the destruction their predecessors caused to the indigenous culture.

This is sympathy: the projection of your feelings and ideas onto another person or group. Sympathy carries an element of discomfort and a motivation for relief. It's not enough to see a problem that needs to be solved, there's got to be some feeling in it.

The feeling of the sympathizer may not match that of those with whom they sympathize, and the thoughts might not either, but the actions have a measure of consonance, at least they appear so.

Sympathy is sincere. If it's not sincere, then it's not really sympathy, it's pretension or even condescension.

Those who seek to make the situation better do have authentic feelings. Their thoughts and actions are consonant with their feelings. It's just that their mindset has a self-centered point of view. The sympathetic person understands the part of the situation that makes them feel ill at ease, but they don't understand the whole situation from the other person's point of view.

The sympathy that underlies reconciliation, reparation, guilt, and other desires to restore balance and gain relief is not empathy. It is a component of empathy—a one-sided component—but it is not and does not lead to the whole picture. I suspect it is designed to avoid the full, empathetic experience. One wants to remove poverty, racism and injustice, not experience it.

A person who has sympathy for your plight does not understand you and they'll be no help in resolving your feelings. They would like to take the thorn out of your foot, but they will not understand nor want to understand the trauma that's left behind. People are sympathetic to their vision of your problem as it affects them, not your vision of your problem as it affects you.

## **What It's Good For**

Empathy is the glue for collective action and the foundation for synergy. It coordinates cooperation and sharing. Without empathy there is no feeling of cooperation. There can be a reason and strategy for cooperation, but without the underlying motive such blueprints are not stable. They would veer away from cooperation at the first splitting of the paths.

Empathy is required to be a therapist. It's also required to be a good parent or partner. In fact, empathy is required to be a good teacher or leader. A measure of a society's dysfunction can be seen in the lack of empathy in its leaders. On this basis, most of today's societies are dysfunctional.

It has been an epiphany for me to realize that I am extremely empathetic. I've only come to understand this recently because my family and social environment did not teach me to be empathetic and, as a result, I was hard pressed to recognize it. I always wondered why I seem to care so much more than others.

This seems to set me apart from almost everyone. Recognizing it feels greatly empowering to me. I can now understand how I'm different and how I might be less different, if I so choose.



## Too Much Empathy

Can you have too much empathy? Would I like to be less empathetic? If you felt that you deeply understood other people or had the ability to do so, would you like to have less of this?

The question might break into two parts: do you want more control over the degree to which you share the feelings of others, and do you want more control over the degree to which you share the thoughts of others?

One can certainly imagine having too much of certain feelings. One could feel overwhelmed with some kind of amplified version of what other people feel. This is subtle because feelings are subtle. A person tends to become anesthetized to continued strong feelings. To succeed under duress, a person can dissociate crushing feelings from their sense of self and, in that way, better cope with the situation. Coping is not a long-term solution, it is a tactic that can provide a bridge to a long-term solution.

As an empathetic person, should you share the kind of anesthesia that trauma can induce? Should you exercise a greater discernment so that you can experience only the clarifying feelings and not the disorienting ones? Should you be more resilient, and if you are more resilient and, through that means, regain your equanimity sooner, have you lost your empathy?

These are interesting questions. I'm going to save them for another time.

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