Empathy III

Empathy and sympathy are almost opposites.

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"If you made a sadist more empathic, it would just lead to a happier sadist."
— Paul Bloom

In Empathy I (https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com/2020/12/30/empathy-i/) I asked, "why [do] I seem to care so much more than others?" and answered that I'm more empathetic. But I need to further distinguish empathy from sympathy. You need this distinction if you're going to learn to be more empathetic.

We often see empathy and sympathy as similar or, for some people, indistinguishable. Not only are they different, they are practically opposites and they move in different directions. This is the key to understanding empathy and learning how to have more of it.

“It can be very dangerous to see things from somebody else's point of view without the proper training.”
— **Douglas Adams**, from *The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide*

Sympathy

Sympathy is an intellectual concept. It’s based on a contrast of values. It leads to an opinion first and a feeling second, though feeling is not necessary. Sympathy is an intellectual agreement that may or may not trigger a feeling. A person who has no feelings at all can still sympathize with others.

When you are sympathetic you are seeing things from a blindered point of view, a limited perspective that heightens some dichotomy. There is a tension in sympathy. It’s not just “this or that,” it’s “this against that.” If it was simply duality, then you’d be appreciative, but once you see one side as better than they other you’re sympathetic.

To become more sympathetic you need to see alternatives, have some understanding of their difference or a belief that you do—it can be a thin and insincere belief—and you have to apply a value judgement. Sympathy is shared ethics, not shared emotion.

Because sympathy is largely intellectual, or entirely intellectual, it’s often notable for its lack of real feeling. Sympathy empowers the righteous. So it was with the Catholic inquisitors who sympathized with their victims but murdered them anyway. You may sympathize with the impoverished or the criminal, but you do not share their trauma.

Sympathy is not a sharing of feelings, it is not a “coming together.” Instead, sympathy is a setting apart. You can argue sympathy, you can verbalize it. Hitler had sympathy. Dr. Spock had sympathy. Neither had empathy.

> “Empathy, he once had decided, must be limited to herbivores because, ultimately, the empathic gift blurred the boundaries between hunter and victim, between the successful and the defeated.”
> — **Philip K. Dick**, from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Empathy

It’s said that there is an intellectual and an emotional component to empathy, but I think this is misleading. What passes for intellectual empathy is not empathy at all, it’s simply a verbal means of communicating feeling, but if there is no feeling, then it’s just verbiage and there is nothing empathetic about it. Without feeling “intellectual empathy” is just a script, an act, and there is nothing empathetic about that.

There is only one kind of empathy, and that’s emotional empathy. There are different ways of communicating this one kind of empathy, and one way is intellectual. Empathy can also be shared artistically, physically, and demonstratively. A therapeutic demonstration of empathy is largely nonverbal and inactive and happens through a subtle mirroring of emotions.

Emotions are mostly communicated non-verbally and through non-conscious signals. That’s what makes these signals emotional, you can’t think them into existence, you have to feel them into existence.

This isn't always true. A great actor can fake emotions. This is the primary distinctive feature of psychopaths. The difference between a psychopath and an actor is that an actor knows they’re faking

while a psychopath does not. An actor knows what it feels like to display emotions, but they've learned to make the demonstrations without having the feelings.

A psychopath doesn't have the feelings they display and they don't understand that. They don't know what it is they're faking, but they still know how to play the role. An actor is cued by their own feelings, a psychopath is cued by your reactions.

An actor mirrors, a psychopath manipulates. A good actor has a broad range of emotional displays, while a psychopath's skillset is narrow and consists only of what you and other people have shown them. Tell an actor to display emotion and they'll know what you mean. They're aware of the multiple emotions that are latent in any situation. Tell a psychopath to display emotion and they'll be confused. They won't know which emotion is appropriate and they'll need someone to tell them.

An actor can carry their display through emotional transitions. They might move between grief and sorrow to happiness and hope. These transitions will confuse a psychopath as these transitions are displayed infrequently. They understand the display of emotion, but not the dynamics. They can fake the display but it's unlikely that they can display the appropriate transitions.

Emotional empathy, which is really the only kind of empathy, is not intellectual. It requires no intellectual understanding and no explanation. To make the point more strongly, empathy cannot be generated by explanation or intellectual understanding. Explanation can only trigger a memory if you've had that memory, but it cannot create a memory of a feeling if you've never had it.

> "If you are irritated by every rub, how will your mirror be polished?"
> — **Rumi**

Too Much Empathy

In Empathy I, I asked whether you can have too much empathy. It's clear that you can. There are two ways in which one can be too empathetic. One way is to be over-involved. Since empathy is a mirroring of emotion, one can have more than the appropriate amount. What's appropriate is whatever is appropriate for the situation. Being paralyzed may be appropriate in the moment, but being immobilized by empathy won't solve anything.

If the situation is one of sharing, then appropriate empathy is whatever it takes to facilitate sharing. Someone may be experiencing sorrow and hoping to emerge from it. In this case, if you experience a similar sorrow to a level from which you can't emerge, then you'll end up leading them into deeper sorrow. You'll empathize too much with them, and then they'll empathize with you.

On the other hand, if someone is experiencing happiness and they'd like more of it, then your amplifying the empathic connection to a level of joy will bring them higher. Wise people can do this, they can empathize and they can amplify. They can foresee the dynamics of emotion and they have some control of it. To use a poker analogy, they can match you and they can raise you.

The other way you can have too much empathy is to lose control of the dynamic. The dynamic is the natural progression of feelings. This is central to therapy in which many peoples' feelings have gotten stuck. They cannot feel and, because they cannot feel, they cannot move beyond feeling or beyond their current level of feeling.

Trauma is emotion that is stuck. It's stuck in the mind or in the body. Because it's not being organically expressed it cannot resolve. Trauma is like a compost pile sprayed with an antibacterial: it cannot decay and so it persists and obstructs.

In this metaphor the bacterium that decays trauma is the expansion of awareness and the integration of understanding. But you cannot become fully aware of what you cannot engage, and you cannot fully understand what you forbid yourself from experiencing. These steps in the degradation of trauma require energy and generate energy, and a traumatized person may not have the extra energy needed nor the strength to endure the energy that will be released. For such a person the process of resolution must be delayed until they're ready to experience it.

A traumatized person has repressed emotions and deep connections to their trauma that you likely do not have. If you're in a supporting position, then you need to know or infer more about the condition of the traumatized person than they are communicating to you. You need to know what's safe for them to engage in, and what you can safely experience and control in yourself.

If you don't know these limits, then you risk leading the traumatized person into greater trauma, or into harmful retraumatization. You could also fall into your own personal emotional experience that was no longer a therapeutic mirror of the other person's, and in doing so become a hindrance. Here are a few examples.

The Death of Esther

My mother and I were the first to arrive at my grandfather's apartment on the morning my grandmother died. He had awoken to find her dead in the adjoining bed and was in a state of shock. My mother and I were quiet and we were present for him.

Other relatives arrived and soon chaos ensued. People started unloading their coping strategies onto my grandfather, insisting that he listen to them, that he behave in a certain way, that he take sedatives. Their empathy was out of control and it resulted in a total violation of respect and support. The crowd celebrated their own fears and trampled my grandfather.

Most people cannot empathize with death because most people are so avoidant of it. They cannot deal with the emotions of those people who come into direct contact with it. Instead, others encounter their own shock and impose their own avoidance. These are the wrong coping skills for the situation. They make the other person's situation worse.

Helping the Victim

I've had numerous past life regression clients who seemed to be approaching a scenario of their own rape. It does not matter at all whether or not you "believe" in past lives. All you need to understand is that the regression experience feels real. It doesn't matter whether the trauma actually occurred, or occurred exactly as it's remembered, because the trauma is happening now, in the present.

Maybe it really happened in this life or another. Maybe something like it happened. Maybe there is the fear that it will happen in the future. In all of these cases the traumatic experience is a repository of energy emerging in current awareness. The question for the person leading the regression is whether it's appropriate and safe since, as the facilitator of the experience, you bear some responsibility for it.

There was a public outcry against false memory inductions, and the psychological community still believes this to be reprehensible. It is a Red Herring. There are no demonstrably “false memories” because all memories are false. It is the taking of memories literally that is unprofessional.

Memories are allegorical and, as such, they could pertain to either the past or the future. In either case they must be managed. When they’re your own memories and you’re in possession of your wits, then your subconscious manages the emotional discharge. But when you’re led in a trance or induced hallucination, you may not be able to control what’s good for you.

As a facilitator in a hypnotic experience, or a sitter in a psychedelic experience, you have to exercise cautious judgement for the person you’re responsible for. Their protection is your responsibility. Being fully empathetic with their experience is irresponsible, you have to hold back, maintain perspective, make judgements, and control both their emotions and your own.

For people who are heading toward trauma or abuse in past or present life regressions the only safe decision, I believe, is to offer them protection. I don’t deny them the experience, I provide them alternatives, power, safety, and protection. I work to arm them appropriately and give them various means of escape. The risk is of your being lost in their vision.

If they still choose to engage traumatic imagery after I have empowered them, then they can proceed with safety. They have the option and they have control. This may violate the helplessness and terror that they may need. I will not prevent that as long as they are insistent, are authentically directed to it, and I still have the power to extract them. There is no question as to the reality of these images. They are psychically real; physical reality is irrelevant.

Helping the Perpetrator

I had clients who were gangsters and, it appeared, accomplices to violence. Their situation held some attraction for them but they were also ambivalent. There were issues of pride, power, autonomy, control, and money. Were I to fully empathize with them I would be unable to provide a new perspective. This was unfamiliar territory for me. There was a good deal of withholding on their part.

If I let my empathy run free, I would end up in my own territory and have little guidance to offer them. Their conversation avoided emotions associated with anger and violence. Instead, it focused on peace and resolution. I did not want to dig up what was bothering them because I doubted that I could handle it as well as they did.

My role, and this is what they were asking of me, was to help them navigate toward more peaceful lives. They were a couple and they wanted to have a family. We only met once and we did not work further, but I heard they were happy with our session. Their situation was delicate and I hope they found the support they needed.

> “When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.”
> **— Eric Hoffer**

More on Empathy

So far, I've only clarified empathy. I want to talk about creating and controlling empathy, but I've run out of space. I'll leave those issues to the next installment in this series.

> "Before you criticize a man, walk a mile in his shoes. That way, when you do criticize him, you'll be a mile away and have his shoes."
> — **Steve Martin**

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