

Gift of Healing

Expressing Empathy in Daily Life

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“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

—Leo Buscaglia

The art of relationships depends on empathy. The ability to develop strong people skills allows us to recognise and react appropriately to situations. People with good empathy make good team players, dependable spouses and colleagues, and reliable business partners and managers.

EMPATHY is an essential human quality. It allows us to enter into an encounter with strangers or to recognise and respond appropriately to people's feelings and concerns. The art of relationships depends on empathy. The ability to develop strong people skills allows us to recognise and react appropriately to situations. People with good empathy make good team players, dependable spouses and colleagues, and reliable business partners and managers.

Making Better Leaders and Companies

Empathy not only helps you in your personal relationships, it serves as a tool to enhance leadership roles. In the book *Primal Leadership: Realizing The Power of Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee make the case about the interconnectedness of leadership and empathy: “Leaders with empathy are able to attune to a wide

range of emotional signals, letting them sense the felt, but unspoken, emotions in a person or group. Such leaders listen attentively and can grasp the other person's perspective. Empathy makes a leader able to get along well with people of diverse backgrounds or from other cultures."

According to Goleman, companies looking to implement change as a group must recognise that each individual must first commit to change on his or her own—building empathy for others in the process. The standard team building remedies alone will have little effect if there are collective and individual gaps in empathy. These gaps create unproductive habits of interaction. In one case, consultants were able to target change processes for both the team and its individual members at a company by identifying a need for more empathy training.

Cultivating Intercultural Understanding and Social Harmony

Sometimes, it takes courage to dare to feel empathy. In 2004, the Israeli Minister of Justice caused a political uproar when he expressed sympathy for the Palestinians, whom many fellow citizens saw as the "enemy". Yosef Lapid dared to question the Israeli army's plans to demolish thousands of Palestinian homes in a zone along the Egyptian border. He had been touched by images on the evening news. He said: "When I saw a picture on the TV of an old woman on all fours in the ruins of her home looking under some floor tiles for her medicine, I thought 'What would I say if it were my grandmother?'" His grandmother was a Holocaust victim.

This incident demonstrated how a simple emotion could widen the definition of one's group and community. When we expand our sphere of concern, we act in a more ethical manner. We are now concerned with the higher, universal good rather than narrowly defined agenda often influenced by the politics, religion, or biases of others, and possibly prejudices formed years ago. Lapid felt a surge of concern for the Palestinians. He saw them as a part of his own community, worthy of protection and consideration. Empathy is the one tool we can use to fight prejudices and xenophobia.

In principle, personal empathy can override society's rules about how to treat others. During World War II, when Ger-

man businessperson Oskar Schindler kept Jews out of concentration camps by putting them to work in his factories, his personal feelings about the men and women trumped his society's values.

Empathy can be a form of compassion that may be regarded as politically subversive but speaks of our basic humanity in the face of extreme conditions or moral dilemmas. During wartime, prison guards may often sneak extra food to prisoners. Soldiers may let captives live rather than be summarily executed. These small gestures abound in history, demonstrating how empathy can humanise the enemy. So let's ask ourselves, how can we disarm the defensive guard within us and each do a little more to work with our enemies at work and in our families?

Creating an effective democracy or a world wherein all people and cultures are safe and respected requires empathy—the ability to listen to a variety of ideas, concepts, and feelings, and to give credence to the feelings and opinions of others. Nurturing empathy in society can move us away from bigotry and intolerance. The more each of us as individuals develops this ability, the more it can be reflected in society as a whole.

In a globalised world, empathy is a powerful tool. Cross-cultural dialogue can easily lead to miscues and misunderstandings. Empathy is an antidote that attunes people to subtleties in body language, or allows them to hear the emotional mes-

sage beneath the words. Cross-cultural communication is crucial in today's increasingly diverse world. Now more than ever, empathy is critical to managing and working in diverse workforces and doing business across borders.

Connecting with Others

One of the biggest benefits of practising empathy in our personal relationships is feeling warmth and connection with others. We recognise the need to win friends and influence people as the title of Dale Carnegie's book describes, and showing empathy is often the key to helping achieve that goal. As Carnegie states: "It takes character and self-control to be understanding and forgiving." Possessing empathy gives us the ability to do just that.

Practising empathy shows that we don't live in a vacuum. In our families and communities, we are dependent on each other for survival. In particular, in intimate relationships, it can sometimes be difficult to show empathy because our reactions are triggered by some deep need from the other person—love and feelings of security—or fear of abandonment or emotional deprivation. This makes the incidence of emotional hijackings that cloud empathy very high in relationships with our close friends, spouse, and children.



Using Empathy to Deal with Conflict

Although empathy is intangible, its effects can be surprisingly real, particularly in diffusing conflicts. An uncooperative person who is upset or hysterical can be soothed through accommodation and empathy. Empathy is crucial when dealing with another person's viewpoint, especially one that is in conflict with our own.

Empathy should not be mistaken for unconditional support. We can understand and recognise another person's point of view and not agree with it or even like it. Researchers often describe a mental approach called unconditional positive regard. This is a situation where you suspend judgement in order to pay full attention to the other person.

This takes strong communication skills and patience. Start by communicating your intention to understand the other person's position: "I can see you are upset. Help me understand why you are upset." And then let the other person tell his story without interrupting or being defensive. As the person talks, you need to communicate your own understanding: "That must be so frustrating for you." or "I can see now why that would annoy you." Use genuine responses.

Empathy for others makes people feel valued and builds inclusiveness and mutual respect. In conversation, we can use empathy to show that we are receptive to feedback and opinion and demonstrate that we value and show appreciation for the other person's point of view. At the same time, you want to avoid feigning empathy. Search deep within yourself for common experiences. Your expressions of empathy must be genuine and nonjudgemental. Be mindful of using expressions such as, "you must be ..." or "I know what you feel."

People who choose to develop empathy for others learn to be really present in all their interactions, especially with people they are closest with. Additionally, they unlock other powerful interpersonal skills. ✎

Reference:

Goleman, DP, R. Boyatzis, and A. McKee, 2002, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, Harvard University Business School Press.

Case Study 1:

Empathy's Importance in Marital Bliss

ALAN was in his late forties when he married for the second time. One of the reasons he had fallen in love with his second wife was her ability to interact and communicate with almost everyone. When Jessica was around, people felt at ease and Alan benefitted from her calming presence.

After their marriage, they would often have arguments. Jessica claimed that she didn't feel listened to, asserting that Alan didn't care about what she thought or felt. He had no idea what she meant.

Out of frustration, they went to a marriage counsellor who taught Alan how to actively listen to Jessica and to reflect back what he was hearing in a technique called "mirroring". At first, Alan thought it was ridiculous to repeat something she had just said, but he decided to try it anyway. The next time a disagreement surfaced, Alan listened to his wife (which meant he had to be totally present during the interaction), and then he repeated what he heard. He was amazed at her positive response.

But he was even more amazed that by listening to her and watching her as she talked, he was able to understand her point of view. Alan was learning to be empathetic and the impact on their relationship was "nothing short of miraculous".

Case Study 2:

Empathy in Educational Settings

CARL Rogers, a therapist known for his contribution to client-centered therapy, defined empathy as an understanding of another person's world as seen from the inside. It is a sensing of the other person's private world as if it were one's own but without losing the "as if" quality. The skill of perceiving accurately the experiences of another person, without losing track of our emotional state and mental balance, is empathy at its best. We are attuned to others while still maintaining our emotional self-awareness. We use emotions to understand another person's plight, without losing our objectivity.

This is best demonstrated among highly regarded teachers in the classroom. Research has shown that empathy plays a significant role in learning. While the expression of empathy in a typical classroom can be complicated, it helps teachers connect with students at their level. When teachers can understand and read a student's reactions, the likelihood of significant learning among students increases.

Savvy teachers often have a strong ability to tune-in to their students' feelings, without losing the ability to question the logic behind those feelings. It has been mentioned that students feel deeply appreciative when they are simply understood, not evaluated, not judged, simply understood from their own point of view. ✎

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