

Empathy

Richard P. Himmer

Empathy is the ability to see life, experiences, pain, and joy through the eyes of another person. It is not understanding what another person is experiencing because of similar experiences, that is relating. Relating is usually a speed bump in the conversation. Empathy deepens emotional intimacy and strengthens mutual trust and respect.

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At the heart of developing emotional intimacy is the skill of empathy. The essence of having empathy for another person is not an attitude of being nice and listening or being experienced in many facets of life.

The essence of empathy is usually misunderstood and the source of communication blind spots that create push back and ill feelings. A word of caution: practicing empathy according to the current dictionary definition or the vernacular understanding by polled seminar attendees dissipates mutual trust and respect.

There are two words, in addition to empathy, that also creates a fair amount of confusion when asked to define them, sympathy and compassion. Based on a non-scientific poll of a little more than a thousand participants in seminars and workshops, when asked to define sympathy, empathy, and then compassion, the following is how they responded:

Sympathy: feeling sorry for someone. I'm sorry you lost your grandmother. I'm sorry you didn't get the promotion. I'm sorry my team spanked yours.

Dictionary version: harmony of or agreement in feeling; the power of sharing the feelings of another, especially in sorrow or trouble; compassion.

Empathy: feeling the pain of another based on a similar experience. Your co-worker comes to work in a cast with crutches from a ski vacation. You chuckle and say or feel, "I know what you're going through, that happened to me last year." Your friend informs you that her brother has cancer, you say or feel: "I know what you're going through, my aunt has cancer as well."

Dictionary version: the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feeling or thoughts of another; can be confused with sympathy.

So far the dictionary has sympathy associated with compassion and empathy confused with sympathy.

Compassion: a deep feeling of pain, sufficient to cause action. Your brother is out of work at Christmas, you send money for his children. There is a major earthquake in a Third World Country and many people are without water and basic supplies, you donate to the Red Cross or to your church.

Dictionary: a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune; accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.

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Using the combined definitions, which seem in harmony with each other, here are the results:

Sympathy remains the same. "I'm sorry for your misfortune."

Empathy is a deeper form of sympathy but only applicable if I've had a similar experience vicariously or I can create it intellectually.

Compassion is DEEP sympathy with a strong desire to mitigate the pain.

The problem with this definition of empathy is, it doesn't work, nor is it congruent with how social scientists use the word. I'll explain my rationale with the following story.

I once attempted empathetic overtures (according to the above stated definition) with my wife combining both vicarious and intellectual experiences. In my younger days, it was common for my buds and I to congregate at the gym on Saturday nights and play some basketball. We would usually get 10 guys and go at it for about 2 hours.

On this particular evening, I had insufficient nutrition intake prior to engaging in the activity, so after 2+ hours of intense full-court basketball, I suffered severe stomach spasms late into the night. If you've ever experienced stomach spasms, you know that the pain is very intense and the victim (me) usually ends up in the fetal position or some other position to alleviate the pain. My position of choice was on my hands and knees with my head on the ground. It didn't really help, but getting in the position was an intellectual opiate that I was taking action.

During the breaks between intense cramping and the temporary relief that comes prior to the next set of cramps, I noticed the similarity with childbirth. I was in labor and this child was huge. After taking a sip of water and wiping the beads of sweat from my brow, I said in my best victim voice: "Hey Cheri, this is like child birth. In fact, it may be worse."

Cheri looked at me in astonishment and laughed. Then she explained that my little tummy ache isn't close to giving birth and that I have no idea what I'm talking about.

Now I don't know about you, but when I'm in great pain (like unto child birth) and someone laughs at me and my pain, my amygdala fires adrenaline laced nuclear warheads to my major muscles groups with "FIGHT" written on the warhead. Just at the moment I was ready to set my bride right, another wave of pain

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swept over me and I hit my five point stance, two knees, two hands, and forehead and the impending argument ended.

After the delivery of my stomach spasms, I collected my thoughts and asked Cheri if she had ever had stomach spasms. She answered in the negative. Hmmm, I thought, that's interesting. "How do you know that childbirth is more painful," I queried. "Because it is," she said. You're a man and can't tolerate pain like a woman."

She just passed judgment on my pain based upon her pain. Fascinating, I thought and chose to disengage the discussion until now. Let's unwrap that discussion of over 20 years past.

At the time of my childbirth-like pain, I had only experienced actual childbirth through the eyes of a father. I was by the side of my wife through the entire experience massaging her as she delivered our first born using the La Maz method. She went through the entire ordeal without drugs, a completely natural birth. (She has since conducted that experience four more times for a total of five male deliveries au-natural.) An accomplishment of enormous proportions.

I likewise have experienced stomach spasms approximately 7 or 8 times in my life. However, from this point on, we are not discussing pain levels as you are probably thinking, rather, the discussion will be on the topic of empathy.

The dictionary definition of empathy creates a problem for men. We can never empathize with women on many things (e.g. child birth, menstruating). On the other hand, my wife cannot empathize with my stomach spasms, or as she called them, "your little tummy aches."

The next consideration is paramount to the paradigm of empathy. Let's say you've lost your father in a tragic accident. At the funeral, friends and family pay their respects and wish to comfort your grieving. Let's try this attempt at giving comfort through the existing definition of empathy:

"I'm so sorry to hear about the tragic death of your father. I lost my sister when I was eleven and I know exactly what you are going through. Just give it some time and it gets easier every day. If you need any help, just let me know."

So how are you feeling? Better? Uplifted? Is it comforting that someone else knows exactly what you are going through? Most people find it best to use brevity in times of deep sorrow and stick with sympathy or if compelled, compassion.

Many people feel socially awkward in such circumstances because they want to do more than they can, so they throw in the requisite "Let me know if I can do

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anything for you.” As a general rule, someone suffering from the loss of a father is not ruminating ways others can perform service.

What Empathy Is Not

The essence of empathy is seeing through another person’s eyes, feeling through another person’s heart, and experiencing through another person’s mind. *You* are not part of the empathy process. You don’t know how they feel or think, and you don’t know what they see, until you ask them.

Many years ago I received a phone call from the mother two-childhood friends, brothers. After exchanging pleasantries, she explained that her husband had passed away and that both of her boys were having a difficult time. She wanted me to call them because I had lost my father and knew what they were going through. I could relate as she put it.

This is not empathy. The extent of my knowledge is my own experience. I know what it is like to lose a father at a young age, but I don’t know what it is like to lose a father in my 20s. The relationship with my father was different than my friends’ relationships. My dad died in a war, their father died of cancer. I could offer only my experience as a discussion point.

I called my friends and talked about their feelings and let them share their thoughts with me. The call was never about me, mostly because I didn’t know what to say, as my feelings were still tender at the time. The phone call provided some healing for my friends, at least I believe it did, because I couldn’t and didn’t relate.

Consider for a moment if I had made the discussion about me using such phrases as “I know exactly what you are going through?” Despite the fact I was invited to share my feelings, what kind of friend takes all the attention to himself when the opposite behavior is needed?

There is not a person in this world who knows what you are going through unless they have been interested long enough and asked enough questions to get as full a picture as you are capable of verbally painting. If and when that happens, that person has exhibited empathy.

When others feel you are connected with them, trust and respect increase. When others perceive you are presumptuous, like claiming to know what they are feeling, trust is violated and respect is lost.

Here are three things empathy is not.

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First, empathy is not trying to be nice. Making polite statements can be done by mean people as easily as it can be done by nice people. Being politically correct is viewed by some as being nice, but to many it is offensive. Bad people can fake nice and nice people will often use nice to hide behind insecurity or a lack of skills to break the conversation surface for fear of offending.

Second, empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is about you, empathy is about them. Sympathy is an expression of how you feel, not how they feel. I'm sorry my team trounced your team. It's all about me in this case, I'm expressing my feeling about the other person's situation.

Third, empathy is not being agreeable. Empathy is about acknowledging the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of another person without inserting *you* into the discussion. There is a common communication Blind Spot called relating that often interferes with our ability to empathize. The minute phrases such as "I know what you mean" or "That happened to me" pop up, empathy vanishes. You've switched the topic from them to you and are now being agreeable and finding commonality.

When properly used, empathy can resolve conflict, avoid contention, diffuse anger, mitigate disagreements, and create emotional intimacy or a space of mutual trust and respect.

Imagine the countless broken marriages that would be thriving if even one spouse practiced empathy. But we'd rather have the other person practice it first before we do. How many corporate cultures would be transformed if management practiced empathy with the employees, which creates the value, which earns the revenue to pay the managers, who perceive their job is to be right?