



Empathy

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Dr. Paul Wong tells the story of Johnny, who was diagnosed with cancer when he was only 17 years old. He became very angry and refused to talk to anyone.

In his mind, this simply wasn't fair.

When family members tried to console him by talking about his problems, he rejected them. Often he yelled at them. Even with the doctor he had no patience.

He stayed in his bedroom for days at a time. After a few weeks, the minister came by to talk with him. Johnny rejected him too. He barked at the minister, "You don't know what it's like." But the minister responded quietly, "Well actually I do because I have cancer myself."

At this point, Johnny began to cry. It was as if an emotional barrier had melted. He spent the next couple hours talking with the minister and found himself accepting his illness. He began feeling better than he had since he was first diagnosed.

He had been touched by the minister's empathy, and had found his own.

Empathy is the ability to experience, and respond to, another person's feelings. Empathy is more than just awareness of another person's emotions. It's feeling those emotions within and expressing your feelings in a heartfelt way

Empathy requires the cognitive ability to understand another person's feelings and thoughts, and the emotional capacity to actually feel them. Some scientists believe that empathy also includes the ability to communicate that understanding to another person.

To some extent, our ability to be empathic is genetic, inherited over generations. There is a survival value to the human species to be able to know what another human is experiencing. But, empathy can also be taught.

For example, many programs in the schools have taught children how to be more empathic. Interestingly, the children who participated in these programs improved on a number of levels. They tended to do better academically, score better on tests of higher-order reading comprehension, display enhanced creative thinking and critical thinking, show an increase in pro-social behavior (sharing, cooperation, trust, kindness), and experience a decrease in bullying and aggression.

Studies of adults have shown that those who are more empathic tend to be happier. For one thing, they're motivated to do things for others and helping others increases their own happiness. On the opposite end of the spectrum, people who remain preoccupied with themselves tend to be unhappy.

As you might have guessed, empathy increases with age. In general, adolescents are capable of, and show, more empathy than toddlers while adults are capable of, and show, more empathy than adolescents. In addition, women tend to be more empathic than men.

How to Improve Empathy

When we experience empathy, three things happen. First we recognize a person's emotional state. Second, we connect to that state and actually experience it ourselves. And third, we act on it. We show our feelings to the other person or talk with that person in depth about what he or she is experiencing.

Parents can help children become more empathic by:

- Being responsive to children's feelings and needs.
- Acting positively toward positive behavior.
- Modeling empathic behavior.
- Reasoning with children about the effects of their behavior on others.
- Helping children understand how they've hurt others whenever that situation occurs.
- Providing consistent care.
- Avoiding the use of threats and frequent physical punishment.
- Not rejecting or withdrawing from children when they express an emotional need.
- Providing a home without family violence.

As an adult, you can become more empathic by:

- Increasing your awareness of your inner emotional states. It's easier to recognize feelings in others when you're familiar with feelings within yourself.
- Teaching yourself to pay attention to the emotional states within others.
- Improving your recognition of similarities between yourself and others. Your empathy for another person depends in part on seeing yourself as similar to that person.

Empathy is an important human trait. It helps us connect with one another on a deep level. It helps us understand our friends and neighbors, and even our enemies. It helps us to become more social.

Surely empathy is a trait worth cultivating.

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