

## Where To Start On Empathy? 5 Essential Reads by Nathan Wiltshire

Over the last few years, 'empathy' has taken over my life. The fascination with human understanding has become a deep running passion as the result of many long hours of research, countless exhilarating discussions, and increasing experimentations seeking new ways to apply empathy in business, education, social programs, and public policy. At first it was extremely challenging to grasp, with a holistic view of empathy covering fields as diverse as neuroscience, anthropology, philosophy, biology, psychology and innovation (to name a few). Adding to my beginner's confusion was a lack of coherent definition for empathy - the term has almost as many descriptions as it does commentators. As we colloquially say in Australia, a dogs breakfast!

Over this time it has become my view that, at its most fundamental level, empathy refers to developing insights into the emotions and perspectives of others and acting with those insights. Because of the considerable challenge of accessing and making sense of self-other emotions and perceptions, there are some seriously complex things going on inside our brain for empathy to occur; to understand empathy, it is essential to understand the basics of our biological functions. In the popular literature you might see sympathy, compassion, and altruism (or discussions regarding related scenarios) commonly interchanged with empathy, and while they may be complementary, they should remain separate concepts in their own right. In reality empathy can exist across any situation, in any context, between two or more people. With this in mind, simply because someone offers a good deed does not necessarily mean they acted with empathy.

One of the most enlivening things about exploring empathy has been the amazing response I get from people I talk to. Whether it be old friends, business colleagues, folk in education, and even random strangers, just about everyone instinctively 'gets' the concept, even without any formal enquiry. It seems as though we instinctively feel that empathy is central to healthy, social, human life. Excitedly, our understanding of empathy is rapidly developing thanks to various thought leaders elevating the concept on a global

scale. Thanks to this, the field of empathy is a challenging yet amazing emerging space to be involved in.

During the course of my work and life, many people ask me for advice on where to begin their own explorations into empathy. Having personally consumed hundreds of articles, books, blogs, and video content, I thought I would help de-clutter and put on a platter some of the best sources to not only get started, but to challenge your thinking. Happy reading!

### 1. Empathy: A handbook for revolution by Roman Krznaric

Out of all high-level discussions on empathy, this is by far the most ideal introduction to the topic. As an inspirational yet very accessible read, I suggest this as the ideal stepping-stone into empathy. By approaching the exploration from a philosophical lens, the author provides a high level overview of empathy, interwoven with many excellent historical illustrations and practical real-world examples. Also, there is a great TED talk previewing the book.

### 2. Down and Out in Paris and London by George Orwell

I like this book as the strongest practical demonstration empathy, in which Orwell immerses himself in a homeless life. For me it was impactful as much for the descriptions of lived experience on the street, as it is for the knowledge that this was a transformational period for the writer. The reader really gets a strong sense for how this experience provided Orwell with the deepest of insights into humanity, which he would use as the basis for later seminal works that remain relevant today - 1984 and Animal Farm. This might even inspire you to seek immersion in your own life, to intensify your own empathic exploration beyond your usual comfort zone. It is suggested second on this list deliberately as you will find it easier to make the connection between the author's empathic journey if you start the book with an understanding of empathy basics provided by Roman Krznaric.

### 3. Zero Degrees of Empathy by Simon Baron-Cohen

This was the first book I ever read by a neuroscientist. I chose this because it seemed logical that in order to really understand empathy, it is necessary to get to the very source - the human brain. Zero Degrees turned out to be an easy to read and fascinating account of the conditions that leave some people without the neurological capacity for empathy. For anyone interested in empathy, this is a key insight as it demonstrates that the vast majority of us can be empathic.

#### 4. Empathy: A motivated account by Jamil Zaki

After reading the first three, this will be a slightly more testing read as the author provides a more technical account of empathy. This has been added to the list mainly because it will make you consider what brings people to empathy (or not). It discusses the selectiveness of empathy, that it is dependent on several personal and situational factors, and that we even avoid empathy under certain conditions. Why do we act when a family member is in need of help, or even a fellow countryman, but not the millions living in poverty in far away places? These are fundamental questions we all need to ask ourselves. It may seem overly technical for some - however, those who can stick with it will gain new levels of insight.

#### 5. Well Designed: How to use empathy to create products people love by Jon Kolko

Having read the first four on this list, you're probably thinking, 'Great, I now have some understanding of empathy... but what the heck am I supposed to do with it?' One of the great challenges I see at the moment is the rapidly developing thought leadership in the clinic sphere, coupled with a relative dearth of advice on applied empathy. Well Designed takes steps towards a practical framework for applying aspects of empathy in product design. The author combines his background in design thinking and develops it to address the need for robust empathic insights. To do this he leverages ethnographic techniques and an immersive account of empathy, which indicates that observation is an essential starting point. The steps contained within this book are simple enough for anyone to try - not only in product development, but also in service or process design.