

## What Is Empathy?

by <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu>

The term “empathy” is used to describe a wide range of experiences. Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

Contemporary researchers often differentiate between two types of empathy: “Affective empathy” refers to the sensations and feelings we get in response to others’ emotions; this can include mirroring what that person is feeling, or just feeling stressed when we detect another’s fear or anxiety. “Cognitive empathy,” sometimes called “perspective taking,” refers to our ability to identify and understand other peoples’ emotions. Studies suggest that people with autism spectrum disorders have a hard time empathizing.

Empathy seems to have deep roots in our brains and bodies, and in our evolutionary history. Elementary forms of empathy have been observed in our primate relatives, in dogs, and even in rats. Empathy has been associated with two different pathways in the brain, and scientists have speculated that some aspects of empathy can be traced to mirror neurons, cells in the brain that fire when we observe someone else perform an action in much the same way that they would fire if we performed that action ourselves. Research has also uncovered evidence of a genetic basis to empathy, though studies suggest that people can enhance (or restrict) their natural empathic abilities.

Having empathy doesn’t necessarily mean we’ll want to help someone in need, though it’s often a vital first step toward compassionate action.

For more: Read Frans de Waal’s essay on “The Evolution of Empathy” and Daniel Goleman’s overview of different forms of empathy, drawing on the work of Paul Ekman.

## Why Practice Empathy?

Empathy is a building block of morality—for people to follow the Golden Rule, it helps if they can put themselves in someone else’s shoes. It is also a key ingredient of successful relationships because it helps us understand the perspectives, needs, and intentions of others. Here are some of the ways that research has testified to the far-reaching importance of empathy.

Seminal studies by Daniel Batson and Nancy Eisenberg have shown that people higher in empathy are more likely to help others in need, even when doing so cuts against their self-interest.

Empathy reduces prejudice and racism: In one study, white participants made to empathize with an African American man demonstrated less racial bias afterward.

Empathy is good for your marriage: Research suggests being able to understand your partner's emotions deepens intimacy and boosts relationship satisfaction; it's also fundamental to resolving conflicts. (The GGSC's Christine Carter has written about effective strategies for developing and expressing empathy in relationships.)

Empathy reduces bullying: Studies of Mary Gordon's innovative Roots of Empathy program have found that it decreases bullying and aggression among kids, and makes them kinder and more inclusive toward their peers. An unrelated study found that bullies lack "affective empathy" but not cognitive empathy, suggesting that they know how their victims feel but lack the kind of empathy that would deter them from hurting others.

Empathy promotes heroic acts: A seminal study by Samuel and Pearl Oliner found that people who rescued Jews during the Holocaust had been encouraged at a young age to take the perspectives of others.

Empathy fights inequality. As Robert Reich and Arlie Hochschild have argued, empathy encourages us to reach out and want to help people who are not in our social group, even those who belong to stigmatized groups, like the poor. Conversely, research suggests that inequality can reduce empathy: People show less empathy when they attain higher socioeconomic status.

Empathy is good for the office: Managers who demonstrate empathy have employees who are sick less often and report greater happiness.

Empathy is good for health care: A large-scale study found that doctors high in empathy have patients who enjoy better health; other research suggests training doctors to be more empathic improves patient satisfaction and the doctors' own emotional well-being.

For more: Consider the dark sides to empathy: Some argue that sociopaths can use empathy to help them exploit or even torture people, and caregivers risk feeling emotionally overwhelmed if they can't regulate their empathy.

## How to Cultivate Empathy?

Humans experience affective empathy from infancy, physically sensing their caregivers' emotions and often mirroring those emotions. Cognitive empathy emerges later in development, around three to four years of age, roughly when children start to develop an elementary "theory of mind"—that is, the understanding that other people experience the world differently than they do.

From these early forms of empathy, research suggests we can develop more complex forms that go a long way toward improving our relationships and the world around us. Here are some of the best research-based practices for nurturing empathy in ourselves and others.

Focus your attention outwards: Being mindfully aware of your surroundings, especially the behaviors and expressions of other people, is crucial for empathy. Indeed, research

suggests practicing mindfulness helps us take the perspectives of other people yet not feel overwhelmed when we encounter their negative emotions.

Get out of your own head: Research shows we can increase our own level of empathy by actively imagining what someone else might be experiencing.

Don't jump to conclusions about others: We feel less empathy when we assume that people suffering are somehow getting what they deserve.

Meditate: Neuroscience research by Richard Davidson and his colleagues suggests that meditation—specifically loving-kindness meditation, which focuses attention on concern for others—might increase the capacity for empathy among short-term and long-term meditators alike (though especially among long-time meditators).

Explore imaginary worlds: Research by Keith Oatley and colleagues has found that people who read fiction are more attuned to others' emotions and intentions.

Join the band: Recent studies have shown that playing music together boosts empathy in kids.

Play games: Neuroscience research suggests that when we compete against others, our brains are making a "mental model" of the other person's thoughts and intentions.

Pioneering research by Paul Ekman has found we can improve our ability to identify other people's emotions by systematically studying facial expressions. Take our Emotional Intelligence Quiz for a primer, or check out Ekman's F.A.C.E. program for more rigorous training.

Consider researcher John Medina's two steps for developing an "Empathy Reflex" toward your romantic partner: Describe the emotions you think you're seeing in your partner and try to imagine what might be motivating those emotions (taking care to reply to your partner with "I" statements).

Similarly, some research, including a study among male parolees enrolled in a substance abuse treatment program, has suggested that the practice of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) can boost empathy.

Take lessons from babies: Mary Gordon's Roots of Empathy program is designed to boost empathy by bringing babies into classrooms, stimulating children's basic instincts to resonate with others' emotions.

Combat inequality: Research has shown that attaining higher socioeconomic status diminishes empathy, perhaps because people of high SES have less of a need to connect with, rely on, or cooperate with others. As the gap widens between the haves and have-nots, we risk facing an empathy gap as well. This doesn't mean money is evil, but if you have a lot of it, you might need to be more intentional about maintaining your own empathy toward others.

For more: The Ashoka Foundation's Start Empathy initiative tracks educators' best practices for teaching empathy. The initiative gave awards to 14 programs judged to do the best job at educating for empathy. The nonprofit Playworks also offers eight strategies for developing empathy in children.