

Empathy

Few qualities are as totally disarming as empathy. It's a key tool in nonviolence work – yet most of us would be hard-pressed to say exactly what it is.

Empathy is different from sympathy, which is the willingness to share someone else's feelings. We typically sympathize when someone tells us they're experiencing some kind of confusion or hurt ("I know what you're going through, and I feel for you").

Empathy is different. First of all, it's the ability to sense another person's feelings - even when they don't tell you about them.

Second, you can be empathic without communicating or interacting. Empathy happens at a deeper level than words or actions.

Third, empathy is not limited to the circle of friends or family who are likely to open up to you. An empathic person is aware of the feelings of anybody they come into contact with.

You might sense, for example, that the checkout person at the supermarket is unhappy, despite her fixed smile. You might register that the guy next to you is grieving in some way, even though he's coming across as aggressive.

Brain science supports the fact that everyone is capable of empathy. We all have "mirror neurons" in the brain which build an image of what someone else is experiencing, allowing us to have a virtual experience of the same thing. Example: the character on the movie screen has a moment of triumph, and we in the audience have a similar rush of elation.

Very young children tend to be empathic. Many animals sense feelings. There is survival value to empathy. Yet not all of us seem to "mirror" other people's feelings.

Why? It's purely a function of sensitivity. Film makers use every tool at their disposal to get you to mirror the hero's triumph. By comparison, the checkout person's sadness will only be detected by someone with considerable sensitivity.



Can you develop such sensitivity and become more empathic? Certainly: meditation, solitude, and contemplation are time-tested ways of quieting the mind and becoming more aware of subtle energies. Psychotherapists, nurses and pastors develop this skill simply by paying attention.

Empathy is worth developing because it allows you to navigate the world of feelings which are so powerful, yet so seldom expressed. Most behavior is motivated by emotions people are only dimly aware of. Aggression, for example, is often rooted in deeper feelings of fear or loss that are simply too painful to deal with. Release the pain, and you defuse the aggression.

Empathy is a close relative of compassion and is free of judgment. You feel understood in the presence of an empathic person. You may feel safe, relaxed, accepted. The aggressive person might feel less need to be belligerent, while the sad checker might feel comforted.

Most of us are so wrapped up in our own drama that we are oblivious to what others are going through. Yet being aware of other people's needs is the very essence of nonviolence – how else can we possibly avoid harming others?

Empathy asks us to quiet our minds, drop our own trip, and quite simply become more aware. Once we sense another person's feelings, we are in an excellent position to be sympathetic (i.e., communicate). We may feel compassion and decide to help out (i.e., act). Empathy underlies and supports them both.

*Vishu Magee is the founder and president of Men Engaged in Nonviolence, Inc.
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