

What is Empathy?

Empathy is, at its simplest, awareness of the feelings and emotions of other people. It is a key element of [Emotional Intelligence](#), the link between self and others, because it is how we as individuals understand what others are experiencing *as if we were feeling it ourselves*.



Emotional Intelligence: A Definition

Emotional Intelligence is the measure of an individual's abilities to recognize and manage their emotions, and the emotions of other people both individually and in groups.

Empathy goes far beyond sympathy, which might be considered 'feeling for' someone. Empathy, instead, is 'feeling with' that person, through the use of imagination.



Some Definitions of Empathy

Empathy *n.* the power of entering into another's personality and imaginatively experiencing his experiences.

Chambers English Dictionary, 1989 edition

"Empathy is awareness of others' feelings, needs and concerns."

Daniel Goleman in *Working with Emotional Intelligence*

"I all him religious who understands the suffering of others."

Mahatma Gandhi

"Empathy is intuitive, but is also something you can work on intellectually."

Tim Minchin

Daniel Goleman, author of the book *Emotional Intelligence*, says that empathy is basically the ability to understand others' emotions. He also, however, notes that at a deeper level, it is about defining, understanding, and reacting to the concerns and needs that underlie others' emotional responses and reactions.

As Tim Minchin noted, **empathy is a skill that can be developed** and, as with most interpersonal skills, empathizing (at some level) comes naturally to most people.

Elements of Empathy

Three key elements that Daniel Goleman identified include:

1. Understanding Others
2. Developing Others
3. Leveraging Diversity

1. Understanding Others

This is perhaps what most people understand by ‘empathy’: in Goleman’s words, “sensing others’ feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns”. Those who do this:

- ✓ Tune into emotional cues. They listen well, and also pay attention to non-verbal communication, picking up subtle cues almost subconsciously.
- ✓ Show sensitivity, and understand others’ perspectives.

“Never criticize a man until you’ve walked a mile in his moccasins.”

American Indian proverb

- ✓ Are able to help other people based on their understanding of those people’s needs and feelings.

All these are skills which can be developed, but only if you wish to do so. Some people may switch off their emotional antennae to avoid being swamped by the feelings of others.

For example, there have been a number of scandals in the National Health Service in the UK where nurses and doctors have been accused of not caring about patients. It may be that they were so over-exposed to patients’ needs, without suitable support, that they shut themselves off, for fear of being unable to cope.

2. Developing Others

Developing others means acting on their needs and concerns, and helping them to develop to their full potential. People with skills in this area usually:

- ✓ Reward and praise people for their strengths and accomplishments, and provide constructive feedback designed to focus on how to improve.
- ✓ Provide mentoring and coaching to help others to develop to their full potential.
- ✓ Provide stretching assignments that will help their teams to develop.

3. Leveraging Diversity

Leveraging diversity means being able to create and develop opportunities through different kinds of people, recognizing and celebrating that we all bring something different to the table.

Leveraging diversity does not mean that you treat everyone in exactly the same way, but that you tailor the way you interact with others to fit with their needs and feelings.

People with this skill respect and relate well to everyone, regardless of their background. As a general rule, they see diversity as an opportunity, understanding that diverse teams work much better than teams that are more homogeneous.

People who are good at leveraging diversity also challenge intolerance, bias and stereotyping when they see it, creating an atmosphere that is respectful towards everyone.



The Dangers of Stereotyping

Claude Steele, a psychologist at Stanford University, did a series of tests about stereotypes. He asked two groups of men and women to take a math test. The first group was told that men usually did better in such tests than women. The second group was told nothing.

In the first group, where people had been reminded about the stereotype, the men performed significantly better than the women. There was no difference in the second group.

Steele suggested that being reminded of the stereotype activated emotional centres in the brain, resulting in anxiety among the women, which affected their performance. This shows how dangerous stereotypes can be, and how they can have a real effect on performance.

Empathy, Sympathy, and Compassion: Not Quite the Same Thing

There is an important distinction between empathy, sympathy, and compassion.

Both compassion and sympathy are about feeling for someone: seeing their distress and realizing that they are suffering. Compassion has taken on an element of action that is lacking in sympathy, but the root of the words is the same.

Empathy, by contrast, is about experiencing those feelings for yourself, as if you were that person, through the power of imagination.

Empathy, Sympathy, and Compassion

What is the distinction between empathy, sympathy, and compassion? The words are often used interchangeably, but they do have important differences



Some Working Definitions

Empathy *n.* the power of entering into another's personality and imaginatively experiencing his experiences.

Sympathy *n.* power of entering into another's feelings or mind

Compassion *n.* fellow-feeling, or sorrow for the sufferings of another

Chambers English Dictionary, 1989 edition

Three Types of Empathy

Psychologists have identified three types of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy and compassionate empathy.

- **Cognitive empathy** is understanding someone's thoughts and emotions, in a very rational, rather than emotional sense.
- **Emotional empathy** is also known as emotional contagion, and is 'catching' someone else's feelings, so that you literally feel them too.
- **Compassionate empathy** is understanding someone's feelings, and taking appropriate action to help.

Towards Empathy

It may not always be easy, or even possible, to empathize with others but, through good people skills and some imagination, we can work towards more empathetic feelings.

Research has suggested that individuals who can empathize enjoy better relationships with others and greater well-being through life.

“I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit - the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us - the child who's hungry, the steelworker who's been laid off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town. When you think like this, when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers; it becomes harder not to act; harder not to help.”

Barrack Obama - 2006