

How Empathy Can Heal

Studies have shown that when going through tough times, empathy heals.

Posted November 8, 2020 | Reviewed by Davia Sills

Having empathy can be defined as having the ability to feel and understand what other people are going through. In essence, it's being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Empathy is a learned behavior; however, some are born with more of a capacity for empathizing.

These individuals, called empaths, are sponges when it comes to human emotions. They feel everything that other beings do—whether human or animal. On the flip side, they tend to become fatigued in crowds because they sense everyone's energies, thoughts, and motivations. Empathy is an essential skill for being a good leader, therapist, or healer.

While empathy can be learned or innate, having empathy might come about as a result of an environmental condition during childhood, such as emotional neglect, early trauma, or being raised by an alcoholic, depressed, or narcissistic parent. In fact, empaths are targets for narcissists, so they need to be particularly mindful of people who are “emotional vampires.”

Typically, empathetic individuals are those who process all that is told to them, and in this way, they almost always practice “effective and compassionate listening.” In fact, therapists and other medical professionals tend to get the best information from their clients and patients by implementing the art of listening and eliciting stories.

For those who want to brush up on empathic skills, the best thing to do is to start with active listening when others are speaking and respond with verbal or visual cues to show that you're doing just that. For example, put down your cell phone when you're having a conversation with someone, look that person in the eye, and really engage without distractions or interruptions.

In her book *The Empath's Survival Guide*, Dr. Judith Orloff notes that she's an empath herself and, in her practice, has treated empaths for more than two decades. When describing empaths, she says, "We feel everything, often to an extreme, and have little guard up between others and ourselves. As a result, we are often overwhelmed by excessive stimulation and are prone to exhaustion and sensory overload" (p. 1).

I, too, am an empath, so I feel others' emotions, physical symptoms, and energy. When I was a child, I was often perceived as being overly sensitive and was advised to develop a "thicker skin." Energy fields weren't discussed back then, but now I can see that my energy field was easily penetrated by others. Later in life, I was taught to create an invisible "egg" around my body when in the presence of "emotional vampires" who wanted to zap my energy.

Dr. Orloff suggests that there are different types of empaths—physical ones, who are attuned to the bodily symptoms of others; emotional empaths, who soak up both the happy and sad feelings of other people; intuitive empaths, who have extraordinary perception in dreams; and so on.

Empaths have a strong sense of interconnectedness that others might not feel, and being one certainly has its challenges. We feel things more intensely, can be taken advantage of easily, and are also susceptible to feeling lonely and isolated. Also, female empaths, in particular, need to set boundaries because we easily fall into caretaker roles.

As Dr. Orloff says, "We are in the midst of an evolution of human consciousness, and empaths are the path forgers. A sacred responsibility comes with our sensitivities, which demand more of us than simply retreating into isolation. It's vital that we avoid feeling overwhelmed so that we can fully shine our power in the world" (pp. 26–27).

Below are some journaling prompts to honor your empathic attributes. Write about a time when:

- You deeply felt a loved one's pain.
- Empathy or compassion helped you survive a difficult situation.
- You felt helpless, but your loving care and empathy helped you navigate the situation.

In the healing realm, medical practice is not only an art but a gift. Carmel (2011) believes that the doctor's responsibility to the patient boils down to knowledge, empathy, and integrity. This also applies to leaders and healers. As humans, empathy brings us together and encourages a certain sense of interconnectedness, which the world could use a lot more of these days.

References

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