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# Empathy: Below the Surface

By: Olivia Dennison

Empathy is a concept that is constantly taken for granted and forgotten, but has played an essential role in the evolution of humans since we first began to develop. The foundation, the core of our brains is constructed by the very basis of this widely underrated word. It has created an internal voice that instills our minds with mental conversations of morality and aids us through social interactions with one another. Ironically, many people of the world are truly unaware of the meaning behind empathy even though we all experience it on a daily basis. That voice, that conscience we hear in our thoughts, is a universal aspect to humans directly stemming from empathy's importance. Now, what exactly is empathy? According to most definitions, it is the act of putting oneself in another person's shoes. However, it is more than just this. It is the ability to not only put oneself into another person's perspective, but also is the attempt to understand that person in a way that deepens one's own perspective, that opens one's mind to the stories of other people free of judgment. This concept of empathy amplifies our existence by expressing itself through a multitude of occasions throughout life.

The true core of empathy lies within the beauty of an open mind. If a person proceeds to narrow their mind to only the thoughts of their own making, their overall existence would lack the details of psychological diversity. We, as humans, need this diversity because it helps us to become who we are. It helps us

find our purpose, our meaning. A famous writer and actress by the name of Andrea Arnold once said, "I always think that if you look at anyone in detail, you will have empathy for them because you recognize them as a human being, no matter what they have done. Arnold's way of describing empathy demonstrates the importance of having an open mind by emphasizing the art of seeing people as simply other human beings. If one broadens their perspective and looks past the imperfect things a person has done, they will eventually be able to put their self in that person's shoes and attempt to see life through their personal lens. Feeling this empathy will, in turn, cause the reflection of one's own thoughts and will create a different point of view to consider.

In another aspect of empathy, the maturing of social behavior is an increasing outcome. For example, if someone is feeling depressed or upset and another person communicates with them about understanding what they are going through, they are more likely to feel less alone and isolated in their situation. This exchange can create a bond between the two people and can have a strong impact on their behavior. In a song written by Alanis Morissette entitled, "Empathy," a lyric that expresses this idea is, "Thank you for seeing me. I feel less lonely." These brief lyrics capture the strong significance of empathizing with people and portrays the long-lasting effect empathy can have on them. Knowing that there are more people in the world who have experienced similar situations can truly help them persevere through their struggles. Once people are capable of using their own empathy to help one another, a grown, more matured form of social behavior is reached.

Possessing empathy generates a stronger inner self and leads to an improved emotional life. In an article titled, *How Practicing Empathy Makes You A Better Person*, author Anna Chui states, "Empathy is the most important skill you can practice. It will lead to greater success personally and professionally and will allow you to become happier the more you practice." Because of the ability to feel and see through another person's point of view, people can obtain a state of mind where they feel stronger emotionally. This happens because when a person empathizes with another, their mind accepts the thoughts and emotions of an alternate thought process. If someone is capable of fully absorbing the emotions of the people around them and is able to put their self into a position of another person, this person's own way of thinking may be reinforced, influencing them to gain a better understanding of their own mind. Furthermore, if one is aware of the mental states of people around them, it can reveal a sense of their own self-awareness because of the relations created with other people.

It is agreed that with empathy, there comes a bias. This is a word that is defined as "the prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair" (Dictionary.com). Now, in the process of putting one's self into the position of another, humans do generally tend to gravitate their empathy toward a specific person or certain types of people in their own choosing, exhibiting the bias. However, this argument is just one side to empathy that does not represent it as whole. Of course, the beginning of empathy can start with a bias choice, but this choice only sets the base of a large tree that has the opportunities to branch out to many types

of people and situations. If someone were to empathize with a person only because they were, for example, "attractive," they may learn the qualities of their change in perspective which would yield to a vaster range of empathy. This empathy is something that is constantly readjusting within our brains, always leaking its way into our thoughts. In order to begin empathy for each other, we must let our minds choose who to empathize with and if that means to start with a bias choice, then it is just the beginning of a sprouting tree of empathy.

Ultimately, the concept of empathy is something that we are all capable of exploring. Unfortunately, an overwhelming amount of us narrow our minds to only our own thoughts without taking in consideration the perspectives of our other fellow human beings. But, with empathy, the ability to place ourselves through the point of view of another person, it opens our minds to a world of peace that is able to aid us through the interactions of others and can teach us acceptance of not just the people around us, but ourselves included. Our consciences, our internal voices that are instilled within our minds guide us through the many paths of empathy which bring us to a growing social behavior, a growing mental self, and an opening mind. This simple, yet complex word yields the basis of who we are as moral citizens and provides us with a way of living that is accepting and open to much more than what is on the surface of life.

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