

Can you teach people to have empathy?

By Roman Krznaric

Empathy is a quality that is integral to most people's lives - and yet the modern world makes it easy to lose sight of the feelings of others. But almost everyone can learn to develop this crucial personality trait.



Open Harper Lee's classic novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* and one line will jump out at you: "You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view - until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

Human beings are naturally primed to embrace this message. According to the latest neuroscience research, 98% of people (the exceptions include those with psychopathic tendencies) have the ability to empathise wired into their brains - an in-built capacity for stepping into the shoes of others and understanding their feelings and perspectives.

The problem is that most don't tap into their full empathic potential in everyday life.

You can easily find yourself passing by a mother struggling with a pram on some steps as you rush to a work meeting, or read about a tragic earthquake in a distant country then let it slip your mind as you click a link to check the latest football results.

The empathy gap can appear in personal relationships too - like when I find myself shouting in frustration at my six-year-old twins, or fail to realise that my partner is doing more than her fair share of the housework.

So is there anything you can do to boost your empathy levels? The good news is that almost everyone can learn to be more empathic, just like we can learn to ride a bike or drive a car.

A good warm up is to do a quick assessment of your empathic abilities. Neuropsychologist Simon Baron-Cohen has devised a test called *Reading the Mind in the Eyes* in which you are

shown 36 pairs of eyes and have to choose one of four words that best describes what each person is feeling or thinking - for instance, jealous, arrogant, panicked or hateful.

The average score of around 26 suggests that the majority of people are surprisingly good - though far from perfect - at visually reading others' emotions.

Going a step further, there are three simple but powerful strategies for unleashing the empathic potential that is latent in our neural circuitry.

Make a habit of "radical listening"

"What is essential," wrote Marshall Rosenberg, psychologist and founder of Non-Violent Communication, "is our ability to be present to what's really going on within - to the unique feelings and needs a person is experiencing at that very moment."

Listening out for people's feelings and needs - whether it is a friend who has just been diagnosed with breast cancer or a spouse who is upset at you for working late yet again - gives them a sense of being understood.

Let people have their say, hold back from interrupting and even reflect back what they've told you so they knew you were really listening. There's a term for doing this - "radical listening".

Radical listening can have an extraordinary impact on resolving conflict situations. Rosenberg points out that in employer-employee disputes, if both sides literally repeat what the other side just said before speaking themselves, conflict resolution is reached 50% faster.

Look for the human behind everything

A second step is to deepen empathic concern for others by developing an awareness of all those individuals hidden behind the surface of our daily lives, on whom we may depend in some way. A Buddhist-inspired approach to this is to spend a whole day becoming mindful of every person connected to your routine actions.

So when you have your morning coffee, think about the people who picked the coffee beans. As you button your shirt, consider the labour behind the label by asking yourself: "Who sewed on these buttons? Where in the world are they? What are their lives like?"

Think about all the people you take for granted

Then continue throughout the day, bringing this curiosity to who is driving the train, vacuuming the office floor or stacking the supermarket shelves. It is precisely such mindful awareness that can spark empathic action on the behalf of others, whether it's buying Fairtrade coffee or becoming friends with the office cleaner.

Bertolt Brecht wrote a wonderful poem about this called A Worker Reads History, which begins: "Who built the seven gates of Thebes? / The books are filled with the names of kings / Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?"

Become curious about strangers

I used to regularly walk past a homeless man around the corner from where I live in Oxford and take virtually no notice of him. One day I stopped to speak to him.

It turned out his name was Alan Human and he had a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford. We subsequently developed a friendship based on our mutual interest in Aristotle's ethics and pepperoni pizza.

This encounter taught me that having conversations with strangers opens up our empathic minds. We can not only meet fascinating people but also challenge the assumptions and prejudices that we have about others based on their appearance, accents or backgrounds.

It's about recovering the curiosity everyone had as children, but which society is so good at beating out of us. Get beyond superficial talk but beware interrogating people. Respect the advice of oral historian Studs Terkel - who always spoke to people on the bus on his daily commute: "Don't be an examiner, be the interested inquirer."

These are the kinds of conversations you will find happening at the world's first Empathy Museum, which is launching in the UK in late 2015 and will then be travelling to Australia and other countries.

Amongst the unusual exhibitions will be a human library, where instead of borrowing a book you borrow a person for conversation - maybe a Sikh teenager, an unhappy investment banker or a gay father. In other words, the kind of people you may not get to meet in everyday life.

Empathy is the cornerstone of healthy human relationships.

As the psychologist and inventor of emotional intelligence Daniel Goleman puts it, without empathy a person is "emotionally tone deaf".

It's clear that with a little effort nearly everyone can put more of their empathic potential to use. So try slipping on your empathy shoes and make an adventure of looking at the world through the eyes of others.

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