

Understanding and Building Empathy

Empathy — understanding the thoughts and feelings of the people around us — is one of the most important and most trying parts of being human.

What exactly is empathy? If it doesn't come easy, can you develop more of it?

Stanford psychology professor Jamil Zaki Ph.D., director of their Social Neuroscience Laboratory, says that empathy is a skill that has to be developed rather than something you are born with. "Empathy is a simple word for a complex idea," he explains. "Research psychologists understand empathy as an umbrella term for multiple ways that we respond to other people's emotions."

It's not just others that benefit from our empathy, we do too. People who experience empathy also tend to be less stressed and depressed, more satisfied with their lives, happier in their relationships, and more successful at work.

There are three types of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and empathic concern or compassion. To unpack these types, imagine that you're having lunch with a friend when they get a phone call. You don't know who they're talking to, but at some point, your friend starts to cry.

As you see your friend break down, you might start to feel lousy yourself. Taking on their feelings is emotional empathy. It's that vicarious sharing of what someone else is going through. You also might try to figure out what they're feeling and why, and that's cognitive empathy. If you're a good friend, you probably care about what they're going through and wish for them to feel better, and that's empathic concern or compassion.

Of course, empathy is not always possible nor is it always the wisest response. You do not owe anyone your empathy. If you find yourself unable to empathize with a person or people who actively seek to destroy or disparage the group you're in, for example, you are not a failure. In fact, empathy can sometimes run counter to justice and can sometimes give us tunnel vision, in wanting to help some people over others.

Nevertheless, as a service provider, you have a responsibility to cultivate empathy in the same way that you try to take care of your physical health.

HERE, DR. ZAKI LAYS OUT FIVE EXERCISES TO HELP BUILD YOUR EMPATHY

(Adapted from *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*, Jamil Zaki Ph.D.)

Exercise #1: Strengthen your internal resources

Think about something you're struggling with and how it makes you feel. Then imagine a friend coming to you with that same problem and how you'd respond to them. Doing this can highlight the chasm between the kindness we give to the people in our lives and the kindness (or lack of) that we show ourselves. You'll probably find a significant difference in how you'd treat your friend versus how you'd react to yourself.

High-achieving people often struggle to do this exercise.

Empathy has to start at home, you can't just give of yourself emotionally until there's nothing left. By building self-compassion, we are increasing our capacity for empathy.

Exercise #2: Feeling spent? Spend kindness on others

At some point in your day, especially when you're stressed or feel like you don't have any spare energy, spend in some small way — whether it's in time, energy, or money — on someone in your life. Send a text message of support to someone who's having a hard time. When you're running errands, pick up your partner's favourite coffee. Carry an older neighbour's groceries in.

In an attempt to conserve energy for ourselves, we tend to turn inwards when under pressure. While it may seem counterintuitive, performing these tiny acts — especially at moments when we feel like we can't — can be energizing and enlivening. You may be happily surprised to find that when you give to others, you don't end up depleting yourself.

Exercise #3: Disagree without debating

Have a conversation with someone you disagree with. Rather than debating or discussing the contentious issue, share your story of how you came to form your opinion and then listen to how they arrived at theirs.

This is likely to be the most uncomfortable of the exercises, but it's worth doing given our current social climate in which a person's ideology can be equated with their personality.

Note: Do not do this exercise with someone who harms or denigrates you or the group(s) you belong to.

The point of this activity is to show us that it's possible to disagree with another person without disliking them or seeing them as the enemy. Empathy does not mean condoning, but it can mean understanding.

Exercise #4:

Use technology to connect, not just to click and comment

For this exercise, think of how you currently use your phone and rethink how you might use it differently. Try to be intentional about technology as a medium in which human connection can exist and which you can use to pursue that connection.

Many of us pick up our phones only to look up an hour later to realize we've spent the time doing a whole lot of aimless scrolling and clicking and not much else. For a few days, do an internal audit each time you catch yourself looking up from your phone. Take notice of how you feel, what (if anything) you've gained, and what you've retained. By asking yourself basic questions — "What am I thinking? Is this what I want to be doing? What do I feel right now?" — you have the chance to look at its impact on you and your well-being.

When you can, try to use your digital interactions as a chance to better connect with others. This could mean having more real-time interactions and conversations. Instead of just leaving an emoji on a friend's Instagram post, why not directly text or call them? One of the worst things you can do for your sense of human connection, is to lurk on various platforms and let anger and other negative feelings seep into you.

Exercise #5:

Praise empathy in others

Make it a habit to acknowledge empathic behaviour when you see it. For this exercise, take a moment in your meetings, whether online or in-person, to recognize the people on your team whenever they help others achieve their goals. A lot of our attention tends to go towards the loudest voices, which are not necessarily the kindest voices. When we notice the good around us, it balances our attention.

These exercises can become a lifelong practice. The more we cultivate our own empathy and encourage it in others, the more we contribute to a **culture of kindness**.

