

The difference between empathy and sympathy

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Image 1. A woman gives food to a homeless man in New York City. Photo by: Ed Yourdon/Wikimedia.

Is that "empathy" or "sympathy" you're showing? These two words are often incorrectly used interchangeably, but their difference is important. Sympathy is a simple expression of concern for another person's misfortune while empathy, however, goes beyond that. Empathy is the ability to actually feel what another person is feeling, like the saying "to walk a mile in their shoes." Taken to extremes, deep or extended feelings of empathy can actually be harmful to one's emotional health.

Sympathy

Sympathy is a feeling and expression of concern for someone, often accompanied by a wish for them to be happier or better off. An example of sympathy is feeling concerned after finding out someone has cancer and hoping the treatment goes well for him or her.

In general, sympathy implies a deeper, more personal level of concern than pity, which is a simple expression of sorrow.

However, sympathy does not imply that someone's feelings for another person are based on shared experiences or emotions. That is what we call empathy.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to recognize and share another person's emotions.

Empathy requires the ability to recognize the suffering of another person from his or her point of view. It also means openly sharing another person's emotions, including painful distress.

Empathy is often confused with sympathy, pity and compassion, which are feelings that just simply recognize another person's distress.

Pity typically implies that the person who is suffering does not deserve what has happened to him or her. Pity also implies the person suffering is powerless to do anything about it.

Pity shows a lower degree of understanding and engagement with the suffering person's situation.

Compassion is a deeper level of empathy, demonstrating an actual desire to help the suffering person.

Empathy requires shared experiences, so people generally feel empathy only for other people, not for animals or objects. While people may be able to sympathize with a horse, for example, they cannot truly empathize with it.

The Three Types Of Empathy

Paul Ekman is a psychologist specialized in the field of emotions who has identified three types of empathy.

- **Cognitive empathy:** Also called "perspective taking," cognitive empathy is the ability to understand and predict the feelings and thoughts of others by imagining one's self in their situation.
- **Emotional empathy:** This is the ability to actually feel what people feel, or at least feel emotions similar to theirs, so there is always some level of shared feelings. Emotional empathy can be a trait among persons diagnosed with Asperger syndrome.
- **Compassionate empathy:** Driven by their deep understanding of the other people's feelings based on shared experiences, compassionately empathic people make actual efforts to help.

Having empathy can give meaning to our lives, though Ekman warns that empathy can also go terribly wrong in some cases.

Empathy Can Lead To Misplaced Anger

Empathy can make people angry — perhaps dangerously so — if they mistakenly perceive that another person is threatening a person they care for.

Danish family therapist Jesper Juul believes empathy and aggression are related.

Empathy Can Drain Your Wallet

Psychologists report cases of overly empathetic patients endangering their own well-being. One example is an overly empathetic person giving away his or her life savings to random, needy

individuals. Such overly empathetic people who feel they are somehow responsible for the distress of others have developed an empathy-based guilt.

There is a better-known condition called "survivor guilt," which is a form of empathy-based guilt in which an empathic person incorrectly feels that his or her own happiness has come at the cost of someone else's.

Psychologist Lynn O'Connor believes people who regularly have empathy-based guilt may develop mild depression later.

Empathy Can Harm Relationships

Psychologists warn that empathy should never be confused with love because, essentially, love can cure, but empathy cannot. While love can make any relationship — good or bad — better, empathy cannot do this. Empathy can even hasten the end of a strained relationship.

A scene from the animated comedy TV series "The Simpsons" is an example of how empathy can damage a relationship. In the scene, Bart is bemoaning the failing grades on his report card and says, "This is the worst semester of my life." His dad, Homer, based on his own school experience, tries to comfort his son by telling him, it is "your worst semester so far."

Empathy Can Lead To Fatigue

Counselor Mark Stebnicki coined the term "empathy fatigue." This refers to a state of physical exhaustion resulting from repeated or prolonged personal involvement in the illness, disability, pain, grief and loss of others.

Any overly empathetic person can experience empathy fatigue leading to health problems, which is common among mental health counselors, doctors, nurses, lawyers and teachers.

Paul Bloom is a professor of psychology and cognitive science at Yale University and goes so far as to suggest that due to its inherent dangers, people need to have less empathy, rather than more.

Quiz

- 1 Is the author of the article suggesting that empathy can be a dangerous emotion? Which selection from the article BEST supports your answer?
- (A) No, the author does not suggest empathy can be dangerous; Empathy is often confused with sympathy, pity and compassion, which are feelings that just simply recognize another person's distress.
 - (B) No, the author does not suggest empathy can be dangerous; It also means openly sharing another person's emotions, including painful distress.
 - (C) Yes, the author does suggest empathy can be dangerous; Empathy requires shared experiences, so people generally feel empathy only for other people, not for animals or objects.
 - (D) Yes, the author does suggest empathy can be dangerous; Psychologists report cases of overly empathetic patients endangering their own well-being.
- 2 Which option would counselor Mark Stebnicki MOST LIKELY agree with? Which line from the article supports your answer?
- (A) Empathy has both positive and negative effects; Empathy can make people angry — perhaps dangerously so — if they mistakenly perceive that another person is threatening a person they care for.
 - (B) Over-empathy causes mild depression later in life; Psychologists report cases of overly empathetic patients endangering their own well-being.
 - (C) Sometimes empathy makes people in certain professions exhausted; This refers to a state of physical exhaustion resulting from repeated or prolonged personal involvement in the illness, disability, pain, grief and loss of others.
 - (D) Over-empathy hurts relationships; A scene from the animated comedy TV series "The Simpsons" is an example of how empathy can damage a relationship.
- 3 Which of the following sentences from the section "The Three Types Of Empathy" BEST develops a CENTRAL idea of the article?
- (A) Paul Ekman is a psychologist specialized in the field of emotions who has identified three types of empathy.
 - (B) This is the ability to actually feel what people feel, or at least feel emotions similar to theirs, so there is always some level of shared feelings.
 - (C) Emotional empathy can be a trait among persons diagnosed with Asperger syndrome.
 - (D) Having empathy can give meaning to our lives, though Ekman warns that empathy can also go terribly wrong in some cases.
- 4 Which option provides an accurate and objective summary of the article?
- (A) It is vital for people to express a certain level of empathy for healthy relationships. Teachers and doctors should be aware of the potential danger of empathy fatigue.
 - (B) Empathy is the ability to recognize when someone else is suffering. Empathy is dangerous when it leads to anger and empathy fatigue.
 - (C) Although commonly used interchangeably, sympathy and empathy are unique from one another. Over-empathy can cause health problems.
 - (D) People should watch out for symptoms of anger and empathy fatigue, and discuss any concerns with their doctor. Some professions have an increased risk of "empathy fatigue."