

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 used interchangeably, but that is incorrect. Their difference is important. Sympathy is a simple expression of concern for another person's misfortune. Empathy, however, goes beyond sympathy. 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. Pity is really just 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 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. These feelings are just a recognition of 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. 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 who specializes in emotions. He 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. In emotional empathy, 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. However, Ekman warns that empathy can also go terribly wrong.

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." This 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. While love can make any relationship — good or bad — better, empathy cannot do this. Empathy can even cause a strained relationship to end quicker. Essentially, love can cure, but empathy cannot.

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. He 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. This is common among mental health counselors, doctors, nurses, lawyers and teachers. This can cause the person to have health problems.

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