



The Healing Power of Empathy

Empathy vitalizes the self. Empathy enriches relationships. Empathy builds civilizations. I've seen the power of empathy, and it works. Its power is not coercive, nor competitive. Its power is nourishing. It is empowering.

Daniel Pink, in his book *A Whole New Mind: Why right-brainers will rule the future*, poses a compelling argument that our civilization is undergoing a seismic shift, where the future belongs to people with key abilities, one of which is empathy. Empathy is understood to be the ability to “stand in another person’s shoes,” or “see the world from another person’s eyes.” Pink gives an eloquent working definition of empathy:

“Empathy is a stunning act of imaginative derring-do, the ultimate virtual reality — climbing into another’s mind to experience the world from that person’s perspective.”

The moment you empathize with another person, it is that moment you become that person. It is an *as if* experience. Empathy, when communicated and received by another, can be curative of suffering.

Margaret Warner describes the curative potential from the client-centred therapy tradition when she writes: “... empathy is curative in the sense that it encourages clients to hold their own experiences in attention in ways that tend to stimulate a deep reworking of personal life issues.”

Empathy, here, refers not only to the ability to read another person’s internal experience, it is also an act of optimal responsiveness to another in need. As such, empathy is an intricate act of reading and optimal response to another. The receiver of such empathy is enabled to activate innate self-righting tendencies and growth developing processes.

The empathizer acts like a skillful obstetrician, who monitors closely in labour where the baby is in the mother’s birth canal, intervening only when necessary, always patiently encouraging, and simply trusting that the delivery process, despite the labouring pains, will result in a healthy baby and happy mom.

Therapists help to provide a safe place where an empathic encounter can take place, where individuals, couples, or family members can interact in ways that foster empathic communication. Frequently, we see the healing power of such empathy, which leads to deepening understanding and opens the door to the possibility of reconciliation.

But it is important that we also learn to exercise empathy towards ourselves, if we are to avoid blame, criticism and rejection of the other.

The following exercise in mindful practice directs empathy towards yourself:

- Take some time to relax and think of what has happened so far today. You may close your eyes while seated in a comfortable position, without noise or distraction.
- Notice your body’s state at the present moment, and continue to notice how the body feels physically throughout the exercise.
- Take a deep breath. Inhale. Exhale.



- What feelings arise from thinking about the past day? You may be feeling amused, grateful, hopeful, inspired, interested, joyful, loving, proud, serene, angry, ashamed, contemptuous, disgusted, embarrassed, guilty, hateful, sad, scared, or stressed, among many, many other feelings. Work with the feelings you feel inside. How does your body react to these emotions? Direct yourself to feel wisdom and maintain an open perspective.
- Continue to focus your attention to this present moment. Slowly, pay attention to your breath. When you inhale, notice the air going through your nose, into your sinuses, your throat, chest, stomach, and abdomen. What feelings arise from these locations?
- Through this observation, see what comes up, in terms of words and ideas, and even pictures. Don't analyze, just observe it. Bring light to it, and bring a curiosity to observe it.
- Notice your body's sensations — what do you want to do and say?
- Especially notice the throat, chest, stomach, and abdomen. Let whatever needs to come up, come up. Just observe and bring a curious, open heart and light to these body sensations, to the words that arise or the images.
- Check with your body which feelings need comfort. Continue to ask yourself: does a part of your body feel tense, relaxed, elated, numb, pulsing, agitated, warm, cold, or any other feeling? Does the thought of the day's events make the feelings more intense or less intense?
- When you continue to pay attention to the overall feelings, try to reflect. What kind of new perspectives do you have? Would bringing these feelings of kindness to the self help you to anticipate the upcoming week, to face certain situations or individuals with more generosity and kindness?

Such an exercise, which deepens compassion towards the self, can increase our capacity for empathy towards the other.

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For Further Reading:

Pink, Daniel. A Whole New Mind: Why right-brainers will rule the world. Penguin, 2006.

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