
EMPATHY

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Empathy is more than what it may seem like on first sight. Technically, it is an awareness of the feeling states of another person, as well as any other feeling being. However, empathy has much more to offer. Reflecting even in the narrower definition a communication process, as incoming external information is used to form hypotheses about another person's internal states, it is apparent that empathy plays a significant role in interpersonal interactions and in communication with any being that has the capacity to feel.

In a therapeutic setting, empathy is about the flow of important information between patient and therapist. Without a good measure of empathy, a therapy will not be very successful because the therapeutic success arises from the communication dynamic

between patient and therapist, and this dynamic needs to be fine tuned mutually to make it work.

Empathy not only increases cohesion in an interpersonal interaction, but it also facilitates the flow of information about something that may otherwise be difficult to be put into words. It is particularly the ability for empathy that allows a therapist to pick up on information the patient might be hindered in communicating. This communication of something that is not entirely put into words plays a role in many everyday situations outside therapy, from dating to a boardroom negotiation.

Empathy is an important mental faculty to take part in the world and to connect with other people. Empathy describes a flow of information between people. It means that one has the communication abilities to detect signals about the feeling states of another person, to receive and to decode them. As in other communication phenomena, this is a multistep process and things can interfere with it at various steps. For example, one may not be able to focus on the right information, even though having the ability to process the information. This may be the case in certain cases of less severe autism, for example. If the chain of empathy is not working well, it is helpful to find out where the patient benefits the most from a therapeutic focus.

Empathy is also important in helping us connect with ourselves, we also need to be able to show this empathy towards ourselves, to

connect and get a sense for the feeling states we experience. A better informed person is usually better able to decide, plan and act in the world. A d knowing about one's feeling states is important in this regard. One reason is that feelings are an aggregation and integration of large amounts of information that reach the person. A feeling usually contains much more information than, say, a sensory input.

To read this information in other people could of course be helpful in several ways. Often, in a therapeutic setting, patients themselves may not know how they are feeling about something, so by reflecting what one perceives and feels as a response to that perception can be valuable to the other person.

Another important function of empathy is to make us feel connected in the world, and less lonely. Empathy is a type of communication that connects people outside the purely verbal realm. It suggests something more intimate than purely verbal communication and conveys information that transcends the purely descriptive physical setting. In a therapeutic setting, a connection built on empathy is stronger and provides more insight. Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) integrates empathy as one manifestation of communication into its framework seamlessly. It is thus an intrinsic component. Many other therapeutic approaches, however, regard empathy as an extrinsic factor, if at all, which would be nice to have in a therapist. However, by viewing it also as a communication phenomenon that includes the sending and

receiving of meaningful information, as is done in CFT, it becomes part of the foundations of the therapeutic process, in which an awareness for and adjustment of communication patterns can evolve.

A greater feeling of connectedness with others and oneself, however, also facilitates the exchange of more information and promotes even more interpersonal communication, which is really the backbone of a functioning society. Thus, empathy allows communication to cause more communication. Of course, it is one of many communication phenomena, but because it transmits information that is very close to how people experience themselves, it creates also interpersonally greater closeness. The transmission about feeling states is a very direct way of influencing the feeling states of a recipient.

As outlined, empathy facilitates therapy, if it is integrated into the therapeutic process as an intrinsic element, rather than seeing it as an uncontrolled for extrinsic factor. Empathy facilitates communication because it allows a more optimal adjustment of interpersonal communication patterns which then enable a more efficient flow of meaningful information. 'More efficient' here means beneficial to the individual, and by extension, to any interpersonal process the person is engaged in.

In a romantic dating scenario, for example, empathy allows both to find out whether there is a match with the other person, not only

because feelings are close to the sensation of self and person, but even more because feeling states are the result of summing up large amounts of information. Feelings are the result of processing information from the senses, internal signals, perceptions, cognitive thoughts, and many more. A feeling depends on so many factors that it can be viewed as being very 'information dense', while stating that one sees a blue tablecloth and a candle depend on very little immediate (though much indirect) information. Openness to allowing the free flow of empathic information also helps build trust and closeness, facilitating the progress towards intimacy and any longer lasting close relationships.

Empathy allows for a very rich form of communication, because of the large amount of meaningful information. A lot can be communicated, even if fully nonverbally, in a short interval of time. As already mentioned, the ability to use it depends on the ability to focus on the right sources of information, the ability to decode it and distill the correct meaning from it within the momentary context, situation and the knowledge about oneself and others. The interesting aspect of empathy is thus that it takes significant amounts of information to work with it, information that is mostly not even conscious, and at least partially embedded from birth.

When we talk about empathy, we often mean the emotional empathy, which allows us to experience an emotion another person must be experiencing. However, empathy can have several dimensions, including emotional, somatic and cognitive aspects, all

of which inform us about the feeling states of another human being. The process itself is, as described, more than just speculation as we receive real external information to compose the mental image that reflects another person's feeling state. It is like a mosaic, which has to be viewed as a whole to be able to see the whole image, understand its meaning, and appreciate it for what it is.

Empathy has been linked to more positive feelings in general. However, it requires that one gives oneself the latitude, the freedom to be open enough to be receptive and understand the wide range of feelings and emotions that may be communicated. Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT), for example, increases the capacity for this emotional latitude, and thus empathy, by improving how one communicates with oneself and others. Empathy is an important facet of communication and a powerful connecting element, facilitating communication between people, as one person feels what it feels like to be inside the other person. Understanding is an important element of empathy, because empathy is more than just emotional contagion. It is comprehending.

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