

The world needs more compassion, not empathy

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PUBLISHED DECEMBER 17, 2021

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It is a truth universally acknowledged: Everyone needs to be more empathetic.

Prominent leaders extol the benefits of empathy, with former U.S. president Barack Obama [saying](#), “When you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers – it becomes harder not to act, harder not to help.” It is no surprise that the 2021 Empathy in Business Survey conducted by EY found that [90 per cent](#) of workers believe that empathetic leadership leads to higher job satisfaction.

Being empathetic is about trying to understand what another person is going through and putting yourself “in their shoes.” Paul Bloom, a psychologist at Yale University, [describes](#) empathy as stepping into someone’s mind to experience their feelings.

While empathy [refers](#) to your ability to take the perspective and feel the emotions of another person, compassion is when those feelings and thoughts include the desire to help. In practical terms, an empathetic response to your friend getting in a car accident is to visualize what it feels like for them, whereas a compassionate response is about asking your friend how they are feeling and how you can be of support. To be empathetic is to [say](#), “I understand what you’ve been going through. I’ve been there.” To be compassionate is to say, “I can understand your distress and want to help.”

Empathy can have many downsides. First and foremost, people who are suffering often don’t necessarily want your empathy. Putting yourself in someone else’s shoes assumes that you know what another person is feeling. Someone who is grieving wants a compassionate friend, rather than a friend who simply mirrors the same suffering. Feeling empathy can make the empathizer feel less alone, while adding little value to the person going through a tough time. Being empathetic is more selfish than most people assume.

Empathy can also make you more biased. Leadership and mindfulness expert Rasmus Hougaard [writes](#) that “empathy is the brain’s wired tendency to identify with those who are close to us – close in proximity, close in familiarity or close in kinship. And when we empathize with those close to us, those who are not close or are different seem threatening.” For instance, demagogic world leaders are experts at manipulating empathy. Demagogues leverage their citizens’ empathy for their loved ones and desire for security to create antipathy against those from different cultures.

Empathy can influence you to tolerate unethical behaviour. Social psychologist Adam Waytz of Northwestern University [argues](#) that “empathy for those within one’s immediate circle can conflict with justice for all.” For instance, if your colleague is accepting bribes, your empathy may influence you to look the other way rather than report them. It is often easier to visualize how your colleague will suffer the consequences of being reported than to appreciate the costs of their dishonourable behaviour.

Empathy can motivate dysfunctional behaviour in relationships, like helicopter parenting. Fritz Breithaupt, a professor at Indiana University, [says](#) that “vampiristic empathy is a form of empathy where people want to manipulate the people they empathize with so that they can, through them, experience the world in such a way that they really enjoy it.” Empathy can influence you to steal the agency of the those who you care the most about, which only stunts their personal growth.

Empathy can also result in burnout. Each of us has a finite amount of empathy. Constantly feeling the pain of others is exhausting. The more empathy you devote to your friend the less energy that you have for your spouse or child. Research [indicates](#) that too much empathetic distress leads to apathy, withdrawal and feelings of helplessness, and can even be bad for your health.

So how do you be more compassionate, rather than empathetic? Richard Davidson, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, [suggests](#) that you should “start by envisioning someone you know who may be in pain or may have gone through a stressful event,” he says, “and then envision them being relieved of that suffering.” Prof. Davidson also believes that “encouraging the focus on the person’s well-being and happiness, instead of their distress, actually shifts our brain’s pathways from experiencing painful empathy to the more rewarding areas of compassion.” Feeling compassion influences you to act to help those in need rather than simply trying to “feel their pain.”

The world contains so much suffering and needs your compassion, rather than your empathy, more than ever.