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Empathy: A skill you can learn



Having empathy means you understand others' emotions, share their feelings, and respond with compassion and care.

Being able to put ourselves in other people's shoes is a core part of what makes us human. Empathy strengthens our relationships at home, in the workplace, and in our broader community and helps us connect with people.

After two years, the pandemic has weighed us down in so many ways. It's been stressful, isolating, and emotionally exhausting. Practicing empathy is one way to support each another through these trying times and come out more resilient on the other side.

If you struggle to notice and relate to other people's feelings, there is some good news. Contrary to popular belief, [research shows](#) that empathy is a skill that can be learned and developed over time.

Although some of us may be naturally more empathic than others, or happened to grow up in environments where empathy was taught, almost everyone has the capacity to relate to other people and share their emotions. We all have “[mirror neurons](#)” in our brains to thank for that

Here are five ways to cultivate empathy in your own life.

1. Talk to people, and not just about the weather

One of the [easiest and most straightforward ways to practice empathy](#) is to have conversations with a wide range of people about their feelings and experiences. Because empathy is about trying on new perspectives, it's useful get exposed to lifestyles, worldviews, and life experiences that are different from your own.

The key here is to be genuinely curious, to ask open-ended questions, and to pay attention to how the other person is feeling—to their facial expression, body language, and tone of voice.

2. Try something new

One of the best ways to learn about other perspectives is to experience them firsthand. That might mean travelling to a new country or spending time in a different neighbourhood. It might mean trying new kinds of food or attending a place of worship of a different faith.

Or maybe it means volunteering for a new cause. Rather than just imagining yourself in someone else's shoes, why not try them on and take a walk? See how they feel.

3. Read some fiction

Reading fiction is an easy, enjoyable, and [science-based way](#) to increase your empathy. It allows you to enter the characters' thoughts and feelings and see their point of view. You're able to explore how someone else's mind works and better understand what shapes their perspective.

Bonus points if the book is about another time or place or is written by an author who has a different background from you.

4. Teach your kids, early and often

[Parenting](#) or looking after children are great opportunities to practice your own empathy and to help children develop theirs. And it doesn't have to be complicated.

You might start with simply making a point of expressing and explaining your own emotions as they arise, and then help your kids express and explain theirs. Ask them what they're feeling and why?

You can also ask them questions about how they think others might be feeling, like their siblings or characters in a movie or TV show. You can read books together to practice taking on other perspectives. And you can give positive feedback when they show empathy.

5. Be present and pay attention

Finally, an excellent way to increase empathy is by practicing [mindfulness](#). [Mindfulness](#) is awareness that comes with paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.

When your mind is cluttered and chaotic, it can be difficult to notice your own feelings and the feelings of others. Practicing mindfulness can help you calm your mind, become more aware, and better connect with your bodily sensations.

To empathize with someone, you need to be present in the moment. You need to listen closely, understand their experience and their point of view, and respond appropriately. When you pay attention to yourself, this allows you to pay attention to others more effectively.

When someone is struggling, you need to tune into how they're doing in order to understand what they need and how you can help. That is, after all, what empathy is all about.

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