Empathy is not a projection of others’ feelings on them per se but an active effort at understanding others’ points-of-view. The spirit of empathy is to express concern and care for others. Understanding their view may help us tailor our responses in more understanding ways.

Some Benefits of Empathy

Empathy forces us to move outside our own senses of self and our own egocentric point-of-view. It helps us to be aware of others’ feelings and to be sensitive to those.

Being able to maintain multiple points-of-view enhances learning. It helps people move beyond an egocentric view of the world and into a more balanced sense of others and their interests and concerns.

Empathy may come more naturally to some than others. It helps to see empathy modeled during one’s youth. It helps to form a vocabulary for a variety of types of feelings, to enhance self-expression.

The research on empathy has come a long way since the American psychologist E.B. Titchner first created this term “empathy” (from sympathy) in the 1920s (in reference to a child crying empathetically in response to another crying child).

Emotional intelligence has been tied to happier long-term relationships and marriages. It has been tied to more successful educational endeavors and more successful careers. It is a critical element of self-regulation or modulating one’s own attitudes and behaviors in response to other people.

Developing Empathy to Understand Others

You are talking with your spouse on the phone. Somehow you both have gotten into the same old argument again about how your money is spent. You want to respond back with a smart retort, but you decide to hold back.

A person wheels her cart in front of yours at the grocery store line. She looks right at you and says, “You’re not in line, are you?” It’s pretty clear you’re in line. What can she even be thinking?

Your children are screaming and thrashing at the local library. You’re not sure what brought this on. The tantrum seems to have come out of the clear blue. You need to sort this out, but their mood is getting to you.

A critical aspect of “emotional intelligence” involves the development of empathy or the awareness of others’ perspectives and points-of-view from their internal framework.

Empathy is a sensitivity to others’ beliefs and understandings (both in terms of thinking and emotions).
Empathy While Angry

We tend to have a much harder time being empathetic to other people when we are experiencing negative emotions: feeling angry, frustrated, disappointed, or upset. When we are feeling threatened or questioned by those around us, we may get defensive and fail to see the others’ points-of-view. Teamwork, though, requires a deep level of empathy—in order to cooperate and collaborate with others.

Learning and practicing empathy can have very salutary effects. It is important to respect others’ opinions on par with our own. A version of the golden rule also applies: Treat others as you would want them to treat you. Developing this empathy will take patience as this is put into practice.

Empathy across Personal Differences

Being honest and thinking over points-of-conflict may lead to a deeper understanding and empathy. It may be wise to offer a generous attribution for others’ differences of perspective. Instead of assuming ill-intent, it may help to assume that they are working from a benevolent place, and that may shed whole new light on the interactions. Understanding others from the inside may offer fresh insights. This may enable one to offer the appropriate affective or emotional response—through a framework of understanding.

The practice of empathy may be harder through various differences between peoples—of gender, of age, of culture, of backgrounds, and of nationalities.

To fine-tune one’s empathy, it may help to have interactions with others to better understand them. It may also help to learn more about others’ contexts in order to see where they may be coming from.

People’s pasts may lead to a dulling of empathy. Emotional neglect at a young age may result in dulling empathy. Emotional stress or heightened negative emotions may dissipate empathy.

Practicing Empathy for Others

Empathy is about respecting the personhood of others. A growing awareness of the importance of empathy and its application in daily life may enhance how well people get along with others.

Adults sometimes engage in role plays in order to take on other perspectives—in order to enhance their senses of empathy.

De-escalating a tense situation and asking what the others are thinking may be another step at developing empathy. After all, other people’s behaviors make sense to them based on what they know or think.

Likewise, if one is not being understood by others, it helps to have the emotional self-awareness and the language of emotions to explain what is going on inside.