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Empathy—The Bridge to Understanding

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All the world's religious teachings implore us to love one another: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." However, as we grow, and as the world deals us harsh and painful blows, our natural tendency is to close down, mistrust others, and become self-protective. We develop attitudes that separate us from others, allowing us to perceive them as "other" and different from ourselves. This tendency to close our minds and hearts has serious consequences, not only to our personal health and well-being, but to the well-being of all those around us. When our inherent connection to others is lost, we are then able to hate, even to kill. Yet the capacity to live the world's greatest teachings, to truly see others as ourselves, is found within each of us in the ability to experience empathy.

Empathy is the capacity to identify with and comprehend another person's feelings and circumstances. It is the total experience of being shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye, heart to heart, and toe to toe with another human being. With empathy, we attain knowledge of others through direct personal awareness of their experience. Empathy penetrates deeper than reason, allowing us to acquire knowledge through

the senses and the heart, not merely through the mind. Through empathic connection, deep and pure knowledge emerges about others.

We are all born with the natural capacity to empathize. When we watch a sad movie, we cry as we experience the emotions of the actors on the screen. We feel what they are feeling. When a friend shares their sorrow or their joy with us, we join with them in the moment, and our separate sense of self vanishes. We absorb what they are experiencing. This occurs because one of the central qualities of the self is its ability to extend itself into others and to take their experience into our own being. Through this psychological process, we break down any narcissistic isolation and can experience true compassion.

We may think that to empathize with another means to sacrifice our own self, as we put our own needs aside and become totally present for another, but this is not so. The ability to experience empathy is the secret to personal happiness. When we feel at one with another, our hearts automatically open and we become full. It is as much an act of self-fulfillment as it is an affirmation of another. Our minds and hearts

widen and we experience a sense of deep unity and love. As a result, we feel less alone, less alienated, and more connected to others.

In contrast, if we constantly think of ourselves only, we become isolated and our own personal burdens seem greater to bear. Narcissistic people are emotionally disadvantaged and have lost their ability to connect with others. The depth of their narcissism, and their inability to experience empathy, indicates the intensity of their own unfulfilled need for understanding. In fact, narcissists are unconsciously looking for empathy from others. Those who are incapable of putting themselves in the shoes of others are damaged people, whose functioning in the world is impaired. They often have erroneous, self-centered views about themselves and others, and these views prevent them from developing nurturing relationships and from experiencing genuine love. In modern views, narcissism is described as a clinical illness needing psychological treatment, but it has long been described as a spiritual ailment as well. The wonderful sage, the Dalai Lama stated that “ME, ME, ME” people are the first to suffer heart attacks. He said that those who are empathic with “great open hearts” swim in an oceanic connectedness of emotional and physical well-being. For those who are closed down, the ocean dries up, and they are destroyed.

At times empathy requires us to bear witness to deep and profound pain, and this may be difficult. However, avoidance or emotional flight from another’s suffering impoverishes our humanity, for we are denying ourselves a critical aspect of fully experiencing life. It creates a void of knowledge and emotional emptiness, as we close off from the painful reality of what we are witnessing. We are somehow saying, “No, we cannot accept this.” By refusing to accept all that life brings, we unconsciously admit our inner weakness. We are left impotent to take action in the world to effect positive change. We become self-protective and narrow. Being empathetic, able to fully accept and engage with all aspects of life—both good and bad—and act in accordance with it, defines a person of psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity.

Traditionally, the path to understanding has been through dialogue. However, dialogue has its limitations, as it does not allow us to experience another’s circumstance. We cannot step into their bodies or hearts, nor see through their eyes. True understanding is found only through the imagination. By imagining another’s situation, we are able to see, feel, and know that person in a profound manner. We can share their experience and dispel the separation that still remains after dialogue. In light of this, there is a new tool, Eidetic Imagery, which acts as a lightning rod for developing empathy. Dr. Akhter Ahsen, the leading theoretician in the field of Eidetic Image Psychology, developed a method for unlocking the storehouse of images in our minds. Eidetic Imagery is a scientifically based methodology that studies how images of our life experience, stored in the brain, affect our emotions, our minds and our bodies. These images are neurologically recorded in the brain and systematically stored away for future reference as concrete imprints of real and factual events. When recalled, the eidetic image recreates a vivid experience of the events in our life with drama, clarity and detail. From this enhanced perspective, obstructions are overcome and solutions, powers, and abilities are brought to the fore. Eidetic Imagery allows us to gain access to parts of our consciousness that otherwise would be locked away. It is a powerful technique for developing empathy among people of different faiths, genders, races, religions, or points of view.

Imaging Instruction

Imaging is easy. Read the instructions below and allow an image to be

formed in your mind’s eye. (Most people like to close their eyes, but you may keep them open if you prefer.) Do not worry if your image is vague or vivid. An Eidetic image has three parts: the image you see; subtle or overt body sensations or feelings that transpire while seeing the image; and meanings that may surface as you see the image. Relax and allow the images to unfold like a movie in your mind.

- See an image of a person you want to understand better.
- See where that person is and what he or she is doing.
- Notice the person’s attitude, body language and emotions. Let the information come into view as you see the image.
- Notice that as you see the image, you gain a better understanding of the person.
- If you do not feel empathy or understanding, or if you want to know the person’s point of view more deeply, then do the next step.
- Look through their eyes (you can do this in an image). What are they seeing? Let the information surface.
- How do they feel as they are seeing it?
- Let an understanding of their view emerge in you. Do you feel more empathy towards them?

Below are two condensed responses:

Empathizing into a colleague

“I see a person who works with me. He does not follow directions, and I feel irritated. I feel I give him simple instructions, but he does not follow them and then comes back to me many times.

“I see us in the office. I am telling him something and he seems to be listening. I think he got it, yet somehow it does not get through. The instruction becomes complicated when it should be simple. I feel tight.

“Looking at his body and face, I see that his body seems tired and he has a defeated look on his face. Ha, the image of him is shifting. At first he looked defensive. Now, he looks defeated. It makes me feel sad for him. I don’t feel as annoyed anymore. I feel more relaxed towards him. And I feel there is something I can do to remedy the problem. If I am more relaxed and not irritated myself, there is more opportunity for better communication.”

Empathizing into prejudice

“I don’t understand prejudiced or racist people. I don’t like them. It is hard to believe how they can be so stupid. When I see the image of a racist, I see him taunting a dark skinned person. His face looks angry. His body is animated, filled with rage. As he sees the dark skin he just hates it. I have no understanding of his stupidity. I have no empathy for him. In fact, I hate him.

“As I do the image and see through his eyes, I see that he is seeing black people marching in protest. I see his hatred, but now it is turning into fear. He is terrified of their ‘otherness’. As I see his fear, he seems weaker to me. He actually looks terrified. Now, I don’t feel as angry towards him. I don’t feel compassion for him, but I have a deeper understanding of him. I also realize that my hatred of him is not so unlike his hatred!” ■



Psychotherapist Jaqueline Lapa Sussman has delivered lectures worldwide and has trained top-level government officials, health care providers, corporate CEO’s, professional athletes and university faculties. She has been featured in numerous magazines and newspaper articles and is the author of *Images of Desire: Finding Your Natural Sensual Self In Today’s Image Filled Society and Freedom From Failure: How To Discover The Secret Images That Can Bring Success In Love, Parenthood, Career, and Physical Well-Being.*