

Empathy & Understanding:

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Bonnie Jean Wasmund

By Liggy Webb

Empathy and understanding are the emotional processes that build connections between people. It is a state of perceiving and relating to another person’s feelings and needs without blaming, giving advice or trying to fix the situation. Empathy also means “reading” another person’s inner state and interpreting it in a way that will help the other person and offer support and develop mutual trust.

To truly empathise and understand another individual is an intuitive act where you give complete attention to someone else’s experience and push aside your own issues. To be truly empathetic is to help another person feel secure enough to open up and share their experience. By being empathetic and understanding, you will make the other person feel that they are not entirely isolated in their predicament and provide them with a safe haven to recover and grow stronger knowing they have a compassionate supporter.

Empathy is different from sympathy.

When someone is sympathetic, it also implies support; however it is a feeling that is more fuelled by pity and an emotional distance is maintained from the other person’s feelings.

An empathetic and understanding approach is more about truly sensing or imagining the depth of another person’s feelings. It implies feeling with a person, rather than feeling sorry for a person.

“Empathy is a translation of the German term *Einfühlung*, meaning to feel as one with.”

It implies sharing the load, or “walking a mile in someone else’s shoes”, in order to appropriately understand that person’s perspective.

Having a rich capacity for empathy and understanding is not only a great life skill; it is also a wonderful quality if it is used in the right way. It is an ability that can be used for good, or for evil.



Once you understand someone you can use that understanding to help them, to heal them, to hurt them or to destroy them. If you reject the skill of empathy, you reject the ability to really understand your fellow humans as well as you could. In war, a lack of empathy can lead to defeat, in justice it can lead to injustice and in relationships it can kill love.

One thing to be aware of is that unless people can extend compassion, empathy, and understanding to themselves, they won’t be able to genuinely extend it to others. Not having authentic empathy and understanding for yourself can leave you feeling lonely or alienated; it can also lead to feeling isolated and depressed. Those who are not in touch with their own feelings are likely to have an inhibited sense of conscience.

“If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person’s point of view and see things from his angle as well as your own”.

Henry Ford

They will find it hard to relate to another person's suffering and also find it very difficult to connect and relate, which, in turn, will make them feel inadequate and potentially angry and dismissive. I am sure we have all experienced people who have little ability to empathise and will label a sensitive person as "too sensitive" and the question I would ask would be "too sensitive for whom?"

For those of us who have the ability to empathise, it is important also to try to understand people who are unable to, and to try to understand that these people may be dealing with some psychological pain of their own and a coping mechanism is to shut their feelings down internally and externally.

The ability to positively empathise and understand is indeed to extend the hand of kindness.

So wouldn't it be great if we could all do this and seek to understand rather than always to be understood. Wouldn't it be a much happier and healthier world if we developed our ability to show sensitivity to other peoples' thoughts and feelings and learned to be more compassionate and empathetic?

Empathy & Understanding - Useful Tips

- Listen – truly listen to people.
- Be genuinely interested in what they feel.
- Don't interrupt.
- Tune into their body language.
- Be aware of your body language and vocal tone.
- Use peoples' names.
- Be fully present when you are with people.
- Smile and use eye contact.
- Encourage quieter people when they open up.
- Give constructive feedback.

Life is what YOU make it!



The above article is an extract from *The Happy Handbook - A Compendium of Modern Life Skills*

by Liggy Webb which is out now.

Liggy Webb is widely respected as a leading expert in the field of *Modern Life Skills and Workplace Wellness.*

As a presenter, consultant and author she is passionate about her work and improving the quality of people's lives. She is the founding director of The Learning Architect a consortium of niche industry experts. Liggy has developed a range of techniques to support individuals and organizations to cope more effectively with modern living and the demands and challenges of life in the twenty tens and beyond.

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