

Empathy as a Universal Approach to Personal and Cultural Relationships

Klaus Hergt, MD

In our quest to build caring relationships, empathy represents an important aspect of the process and affects the entire spectrum of individual, social, cultural, and even political situations. Empathy is not tied to any cultural environment but has global applicability. It is particularly important in medical and hospice settings and is frequently referred to in the relevant literature. However, empathy is not always clearly differentiated from the similar concepts of compassion and sympathy in these texts. This article aims to clearly define the term empathy and explain its proper application.

Empathy, contrary to sympathy or compassion, demands that an individual vicariously share in the thoughts and feelings of the other and temporarily become the other. This not only changes the "I versus thou" relationship to a "we" relationship but also leads to emotional fusion. Because of this fusion, empathy is not only universally relevant among humans but also penetrates deep into their relationships.

Historical Context

Historically, although the word empathy does not appear in the New Testament, its concept is expressed nonetheless—"And a second [commandment] is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). This statement suspends the interest of the subject as the primary goal and projects it onto the other, a process that is inherent in empathy.¹ Related thoughts have been expressed by Aristotle, who wrote, "and the best man is not he who exercises his virtue toward himself, but he who exercises

it against another; for this is a difficult task,"² as well as Confucius, who wrote "Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself," which also translates as "Treat others as if their hearts were your own."³

Although the concept of empathy as an approach to relating to another person has been a part of human relationships since the beginning of conscious thought, empathy was first identified by the German philosopher and theologian Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803). The definition and intentional use of empathy, however, are products of the 20th century. Its etymological root is the Greek word *empathēia* (passionate affection), and it was introduced into the English language at the beginning of the 20th century^{4,5} from the German word *Einfuehlung* (into-feeling).^{4,6,7} Although empathy may contain attitudes of sympathy, commiseration, compassion, and even pity, it would be incorrect to substitute any of those terms as exact synonyms of empathy. *Empathy* is specifically defined as mentally identifying oneself with and fully comprehending a person or object of contemplation,⁸ the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiences of the thoughts, feelings, or attitudes of another;⁹ and a capacity to share in the experience of others, not just like your own but as your own.⁵ A common thread among these definitions is the requirement that the subject blends with and assumes the identity of the object. On a personal level, it changes the relationship of "I versus thou" to "we."

Application

Using empathy as an approach to human issues was first proposed and used in

psychoanalysis by Theodor Reik in 1937, and Patrick Casement used the term "trial identification."¹⁰ A six-step systematic guide to achieving empathy was summarized by John Stewart in 1990.¹¹ During the last two decades, a call for empathy has been made in numerous psychological studies, problem resolution, juvenile-aggression prevention, physician-patient and nurse-patient relationships, and even business. In the cultural-political sphere (as well as in the personal realm) the most outstanding proponent of using empathy as an approach to reconciling cultural differences has been the political philosopher and historian Isaiah Berlin.⁶ Empathy is a precondition for accepting Berlin's value pluralism as applied to cultural, social, and political systems. Berlin consolidated and supported the empirical basis of Herder's thoughts; Herder encouraged *Einfuehlung* in the evaluation and comparison of different cultures and societies.

Although empathy, by virtue of its definition of vicariously experiencing the thoughts, feelings, or attitudes of another, has an emotional component, the steps to achieve empathy are strictly rational.¹¹ They are an act of will and may even require the suppression of emotion in the subject. The first step of empathy is to assume that not only are there differences between people, cultures, and political or social conditions, but also that people may have different value systems they consider equally important. This is a practical application of Berlin's concept of "value pluralism," which states that different individuals or groups may subscribe to ultimate values that are not only

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incomparable but also incommensurable, meaning they cannot be measured against each other. To realize this step, we must become receptive and open ourselves to a new experience.

The second step is to know ourselves; that is, be aware of our own world view and values, including our fixed ideas and prejudices. It is a process of self-awareness and may require self-criticism.

In the third step, we have to step outside of ourselves temporarily; we have to achieve a state of detachment in order to put ourselves imaginatively into the other's place. During the third step, the emotional state of the subject may interfere and must be suppressed. The clearest examples of situations that would be distracting are empathizing with an adversary or an offensive value system.

The fourth step—to put oneself imaginatively into the other's place—is the most work intensive. A detailed knowledge of the other's thoughts, feelings, and background are a prerequisite for a successful empathic experience, and all these factors have to be studied and assembled.

Their completeness will reflect itself in the success of the fifth step—the empathic experience. This gathering of facts and experiences may sometimes require drawing from comparable historical situations or other content-related experiences.

In the sixth step we reestablish our own identity. This, however, is never a return to our previous self, because the empathic experience has now become a part of our self and has changed who we are. Regardless of the nature of the experience, we will have acquired a broader view and gained new insights. The nature of the experience and the conclusions we draw from it will then influence our future actions.


Empathy is only an approach, a process of gaining knowledge. It is not an action in itself but only engenders action. It is also clear that the empathic experience may not necessarily require agreement with the other or result in resolution of conflicts; it is only a tool with which to achieve such resolution.

Empathy in Palliative Care

In many human situations, the empathic approach is based on and accompanied by an altruistic motivation or a sympathetic

feeling for the other. This applies in particular to the medical field, social programs, and situations of potential or actual human suffering. In these situations it is much easier to achieve the "stepping out of oneself" and to imagine oneself in the place of the other, especially if these situations occur in a familiar cultural milieu. The more removed one is from one's own milieu, the more difficult it is to take the necessary steps toward developing empathy and the more effort and knowledge are required to know the subject.

Yet empathy is possible under circumstances where one can "grant that the thoughts, attitudes, and feelings of the other are possible within the realm of human experience."⁶ Although altruistic and sympathetic feelings are a frequent motivator, they are not prerequisites to empathy.

Empathy should be considered a basic guide for human interactions on any level and provide the basis for the best application of sympathy and compassion urgently needed in our work as palliative caregivers. 

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