



Empathy Explained

As social beings, part of our emotional well-being depends on our relationships with others. As such, empathy contributes to our overall well-being because it deepens our human connections, helping us understand and relate to others. But, what exactly is empathy?

While we all likely have some common understanding of what empathy is, the challenge in defining (and practicing!) empathy is that it is not composed of one single skill. Psychologists and neuroscientists have come to understand over time that empathy is a multi-faceted (Riess and Neporent) concept, composed of *three main dimensions*: **emotional empathy**, **cognitive empathy**, and **behavioral empathy**:



1



Emotional Empathy

Feeling what another person is feeling.

2



Cognitive Empathy

Thinking about another person's situation.

3



Behavioral Empathy

Being compassionate or taking actions to help based on your understanding of the situation.



Let's take a deeper look into each of these dimensions.

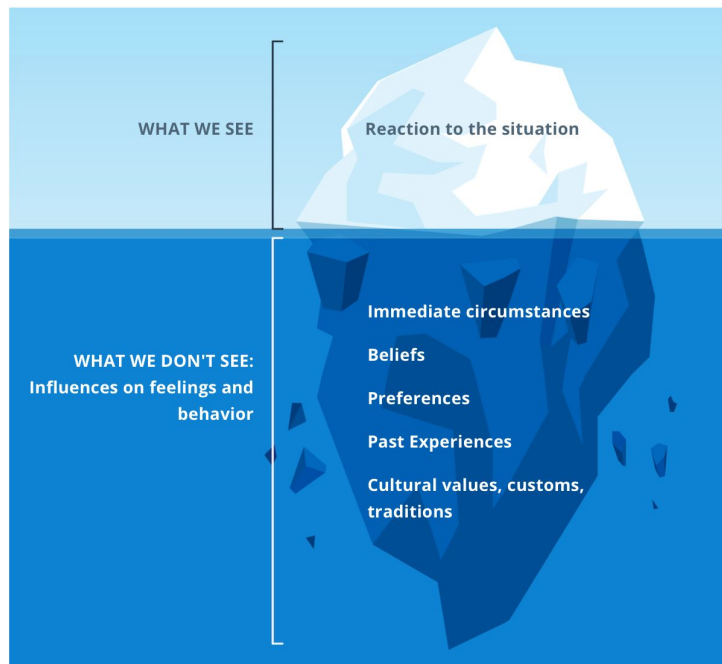
The 3 Dimensions of Empathy

Emotional or affective empathy refers to our *automatic* response to mirror another person's emotions (at least to some extent) -- in other words, feeling what the other person is feeling. This process is sometimes described as "emotional contagion" -- the phenomenon where we "catch" another person's feelings as if they were contagious.

Cognitive empathy or perspective taking, on the other hand, is the ability to understand how another person perceives a given situation and how they might feel as a result of that perception. It involves first recognizing that another person has thoughts and feelings of their own, and then gathering insights about what that other person might be thinking and feeling (Hodges and Myers).

Put more simply, perspective taking means "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" or "seeing the world through someone else's eyes" -- you imagine yourself *as the other person* (not as if *you* were in the other person's situation).

This exercise of seeing a situation through someone else's eyes can really help us to better understand others. To do so, we need to consider all the factors that influence a person's perspective or actions, which we may or may not be able to see (see the iceberg image on the right.)



Importantly, cognitive empathy is a mental task that we can train our brains to perform better and more frequently. And, in cases where we don't have enough knowledge to put ourselves in the other person's shoes or when we are unsure of our own interpretations, we can practice curiosity. By having conversations and asking questions, we can gain valuable insights into why a person might feel the way they do in a given situation. Ultimately this helps understand them better, deepening our connection with them.



Finally, **behavioral empathy** means taking action to help others based on your understanding of their situation and feelings. In other words, behavioral empathy encompasses our desire to help another person while leveraging both emotional and cognitive empathy to inform the actions we take. Emotional and cognitive empathy allow us to connect with the feelings of the person we want to help, and help us better understand their needs so we can adjust our actions and behaviors accordingly. This means that we don't act based on how *we* would like to be helped or treated; instead, we act based on our understanding of how the other person would appreciate being helped or treated.

This type of empathy is also known as **compassion**, compassionate empathy, or empathic concern. Importantly, much like cognitive empathy, compassion is a skill that can be learned and improved over time.

THE THREE DIMENSIONS AT PLAY

Now that we've covered the three dimensions of empathy separately, it's important to recognize how these dimensions build on each other. A line from Helen Riess' book, [The Empathy Effect](#), summarizes their interplay quite well: *"Empathy is produced not only by how we perceive information, but also by how we understand that information [cognitive empathy], are moved by it [emotional empathy], and use it to motivate our behavior [behavioral empathy]."* To conclude, let's examine an example where we can see the three dimensions of empathy in practice.



Imagine that you're driving on a calm Saturday afternoon when you suddenly notice a car stopped on the side of the road.



Emotional Empathy

As you look closer, you notice a woman who is clearly in distress. She gets out of the car and starts pacing around her car. You're stopped at a red light and observe the situation, you start mirroring some of her emotions. You start feeling some distress.



Cognitive Empathy

You start trying to put yourself in her shoes and imagine scenarios that might be causing her distress. Maybe someone is hurt in the car, maybe she got into a car accident.



Behavioral Empathy

Before you know it, you have turned your car around to help. When you arrive and ask her, she tells you that her mother, who is in the car, is very sick and has fainted. You call 911 and offer your support while the ambulance arrives to the scene.



Can you think of examples in your own life where you've seen the three dimensions of empathy at play?

Fostering our Capacity to Empathize

Our ability to practice empathy can be influenced by various factors. On the one hand, the empathy process can be very emotionally and cognitively demanding, and therefore can be affected by our circumstances.

Even individuals who are generally highly empathetic toward others can struggle to show empathy when they're stressed, overwhelmed, or sleep deprived. This is because our capacity to empathize is like a spectrum-- it can go up and down, depending on our circumstances ([Riess and Neporent](#)). Moreover, our own emotional state and circumstances affect how we perceive, understand, and relate to others. Thus, we can foster our capacity to empathize by gaining awareness of our own emotional state and circumstances.

Another critical piece in understanding and fostering empathy is recognizing that one of the factors that influences our ability to empathize with others is *who* the "other" is. As humans, we are more likely to be empathetic toward people who we perceive to be similar to us, as opposed to people who we perceive to be different ([Cikara, Bruneau, and Saxe](#)). This leads to what is called an [intergroup empathy gap](#). To foster our capacity to empathize with people outside our own groups, we can proactively seek to identify and embrace the similarities we might unexpectedly share with others who seem different from us. At the end of the day, despite everything that makes us different, we all share a common humanity that can bring us together and allow us to understand each other's perspectives and experiences.

Amplifying when and to whom we extend our empathy can ultimately help us deepen our human connections, even with people we didn't expect.

Fostering Empathy

Given their social human nature, empathy is an important component of students' overall well-being. Because empathy helps us understand each other better, it has the power to help build community in the classroom. Moreover, research suggests that empathy may promote a safer school environment as it helps students be kinder toward peers. ([Greater Good in Education](#))

So, how can we foster empathy in students? Here are some tips:

- Model empathy when interacting with students! Students learn a lot by observing their role models.

