

Adventures in empathy-building

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I’m an agreeable sort of person: I get on with nearly everyone I know. However, I’ve always had difficulty in noticing and reading other people’s emotions. When I meet my friend Sam, I often just start talking about whatever is on my mind and don’t stop to notice whether she’s feeling up or down, maybe even having some trouble she needs to tell me about. So I thought, maybe I could find an exercise to help me become more attuned to others’ emotions.

Researchers all emphasise that relationships are a key to happiness: if we build new friendships and deepen the connections we already have, we are more likely to be happier.² Surely, developing my capacity to read my friends’ emotions would strengthen my relationships and thus increase my happiness. But finding an exercise to do this wasn’t easy.

My friend Sue gave me a lead. She knows a hell of a lot about psychology and all sorts of “interventions,” like cognitive behavioural therapy. She suggested a simple exercise. When I meet a friend and have a “significant” conversation — more than a hello and how are you — I try to take notice of how they’re feeling, maybe happy, distracted, rushed, disturbed or whatever. Then, to check whether my assessment is accurate, I ask them, usually in a casual manner.

When I met Elfo a while back, I couldn’t help but notice he was in really high spirits. So somewhere in our conversation, I said “You’re feeling about as upbeat as I’ve ever seen you, aren’t you?” Without even a pause, he responded “Yeah!” He was ebullient and knew it.

On the other hand, my friend Reb seemed to be down in the dumps. I could hardly get a word out of her, as she kept answering in monosyllables, usually “No.” I said “Are you feeling a bit depressed?” but she answered “No.” Had I somehow

¹ Anonymised and formatted by Brian Martin

² For example, Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Matthieu Ricard, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life’s Most Important Skill* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007); Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

misinterpreted her feelings? I asked Sue about this, who said that when people are depressed, they often are in denial about it, and that probably I had picked up on her feelings pretty well. That encouraged me to keep trying.

After every one of these encounters, I would write an entry in a table. This enabled me to keep track of how I was going. Over five weeks, I ended up making 32 entries.

Feelings log: sample entry

Person	Date and situation	Person's feelings	Response	Observations
Jules, a long-time friend	Tuesday 14 February, 1pm, at our weekly lunch	Jules was much calmer and focused than last week.	She agreed with my assessment of her feelings.	Jules displays her emotions readily, so they are relatively easy to read.

In doing this exercise, my assumption was that becoming more empathetic would improve my relationships and hence my happiness. Strangely, though, happiness researchers don't seem to say much about empathy and relationships.³ So I examined a two-stage process, looking at what empathy researchers say about relationships and adding that to the positive things happiness researchers say about the impact of relationships.

The very concept of empathy is tricky. I had always thought it was being able to figure out what other people were feeling, but researchers say⁴ this is only one component, the cognitive or thinking aspect of empathy. The other component is actually feeling what the other person is feeling, so if Jules is feeling calm then I'll feel calm too. For research purposes, this two-pronged concept of empathy is awkward, because it means that researchers don't always mean or measure the same thing.⁵ Researchers on empathy can develop incredibly complex models, with all sorts of

³ See references in previous note.

⁴ According to Mark H. Davis, *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), p. 9.

⁵ Ibid.

variables and using regression analyses,⁶ which means it's hard to summarise the findings. So all I can do is pick out a few studies that seem to have special relevance to relationships.

A key researcher on empathy is Mark H. Davis.⁷ In one study, he and a co-author looked at the various factors that affect satisfaction in romantic relationships.⁸ One key factor was "dispositional empathy." In my exercises, I didn't include my one "romantic relationship," with Rob, because I didn't want to make him a research subject, even for a simple exercise, but I can say that figuring out his feelings and responding to them is important to keeping our connection balanced, especially at tense times.

I looked at several books on empathy.⁹ The heavy psychology has some interesting nuggets of information. But by far the most stimulating treatment I found was Alfie Kohn's *The Brighter Side of Human Nature*, which is a survey of research and evidence that altruism is as much a part of human behaviour as self-interest.¹⁰ This inspired me to become more open to other people's generosity and to become more generous myself. Researchers say that altruism is linked to greater happiness.¹¹ This isn't the same as empathy, but there seems to be a connection. In my relationships, I like to help others — emotional support, as well as practical advice — and surely empathy can make me a better helper. This is another connection between empathy and happiness.

⁶ For example, Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B. M. de Waal, "Empathy: its ultimate and proximate bases," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 25, 2002, pp. 1–72.

⁷ Davis, *Empathy*.

⁸ Mark H. Davis and H. Alan Oathout, "Maintenance of satisfaction in romantic relationships: empathy and relational competence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 53, no. 2, 1987, pp. 397–410.

⁹ Davis, *Empathy*; Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer (eds.), *Empathy and its Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Alfie Kohn, *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1990).

¹¹ Lyubomirsky includes this under the category "practicing acts of kindness."

Popular writings on empathy seem to be a mixed bag. Some are general advice columns on getting along at work,¹² and these don't always give a proper explanation of the concept of empathy. One article told about the findings of an empathy researcher: it gave the most convenient summary of empathy ("the ability to perceive the world from other people's points of view and to feel what they are feeling") that I came across.¹³

The most engaging and informative popular article I found was actually written by a professor who researches empathy.¹⁴ So it seems that popular writings on empathy can't be any more neatly categorised than academic ones. The common theme, though, is that empathy is worthwhile and should be fostered. Strangely, though, neither the academic nor the popular articles say much about how to do this. So thanks to Sue for giving me guidance.

¹² Jan Kantor, "The secrets of building successful interpersonal relationships," *Naples Daily News* (Naples, Florida), 14 February 2012; Ye Ji-eun, "Unlocking employee potential via empathy," *Joins.com*, 31 May 2010.

¹³ "A mile in their shoes: understanding empathy," *US Fed News* (from Arizona State University press release), 15 February 2012.

¹⁴ Simon Baron-Cohen, "Lessons in empathy," *Financial Times*, 15 April 2011.