



**Affective (or emotional) empathy:** This is feeling what others are feeling. It means when others feel emotional pain, we too are feeling emotional pain. If others are distressed, we too feel distressed. When others are elated, we too feel elation.



**Helpful aspects:** When we feel the distress of another, this can spur us to action; if we feel pain when others are, we may be more apt to try and comfort them or take action to protect them. Imagine the urgency to rescue a harmed animal, or protest family separation policies after seeing crying children and mothers)

When we feel elation or elevation that another is feeling, this can create a deep connection (imagine the collective euphoria at exciting sporting events the bond between strangers at an affecting concert, or the love felt when you are joyful with a family member over their good news.



**Downsides:** Because this type of empathy means we feel the distress, sadness and other painful emotions that others feel, it activates the pain centers in our brain. It can be heavy, draining and for helping professionals, can lead to burnout, or numbness as we try to distance from the feelings.

It often makes us less helpful to others. Imagine a friend sharing upset with us, then we who become equally upset. We then don't feel like a 'safe harbor' to talk to, as our friend sees their pain is causing us pain. It also sometimes causes us to give advice, dismiss, or otherwise try to 'fix' our friend- in order to not feel pain ourselves.

This type of empathy can also be very limited (and discriminatory), as we more often feel the feelings of people we relate to, identify with, or are close to.

**Cognitive empathy (or perspective taking):** This is imagining what others feel; taking their perspective; trying to understand what they are feeling or going through. This type of empathy is characterized by curiosity and imagination and often driven by a belief around understanding vs. judging.



**Helpful aspects:** Perspective taking empathy is unlimited- we can try and understand anyone, in any situation. We can imagine how people are very different from us, might do, say or believe things that are totally different from our own experience.

This type of empathy lights up reward centers in our brains- it makes us feel closer to people, more connected. For helping professionals, it is related to job satisfaction and is protective of burnout.



**Downsides:** Sometimes imagining why or how someone might do or think something, keeps us from being able to draw boundaries, set limits, leave relationships or otherwise say no to them.

By enhancing a mindful awareness, we can intentionally move toward or away from affective or cognitive empathy, depending on what is most useful or important in that moment. The following graphic identifies some common reasons we'd want to shift our responses and evidenced-based strategies to do this.

# INTENTIONAL EMPATHY

## MOVING FROM AFFECTIVE TO COGNITIVE EMPATHY

**Awareness of:** feeling affective empathy

**Feels like:** distress, sadness, hopelessness (what the other person is feeling)

**Desire:** to move into cognitive empathy

**Common reasons:**

- to increase our helpfulness to others
- to soothe self

**STRATEGIES:**

- internally name the feeling to ourselves ('name it to tame it')
- intentionally look for strengths and resilience in the other person
- remind self how resilient others are
- how often great difficulty leads to good outcomes
- call on faith; prayer
- spiritual beliefs- 'this person has their own path'
- therapy for self when indicated

## MOVING FROM BIAS, JUDGMENT TO COGNITIVE EMPATHY

**Awareness of:** not feeling empathy for someone

**Feels like:** others are not 100% human; negative judgments; 'unreal others'

**Desire:** to feel empathy for this person

**Common reasons:**

- empathy is a professional obligation
- discomfort with feeling judgment/dislike
- wish to improve relations with a friend or family member
- actively correcting negative bias for an 'outgroup'

**STRATEGIES:**

- imagine the person as a child
- imagine the possibility they experienced significant hardships as a child
- bring to mind positive experiences with another in the same outgroup (for racism)
- imagine them as a family member
- imagine commonalities with the person

## STAY IN AFFECTIVE EMPATHY

**Awareness of:** feeling affective empathy

**Feels like:** whatever the other person is feeling

**Desire:** to stay in the affective empathy state

**Common reasons:** to understand what others are feeling

- to propel to action in protecting self or others
- positive emotions, bonding

**STRATEGIES:**

- move into action to protect
- verbalize what we are feeling to the person to connect  
*(I'm feeling really sad/scared/angry, I wonder if that is what you are feeling?)*

## STAY IN ANGER OR DISCONNECT

**Awareness of:** not feeling empathy for someone

**Feels like:** anger, numbness, disconnection

**Desire:** to 'stay in anger or disconnect'

**Common reasons:**

- we are in danger from this person
- we need to leave this person/situation
- we need to protect ourselves or others

**STRATEGIES:**

- take action to leave/disconnect
- take action to protect self or others