



Affective 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 (this is sometimes called **distress empathy**) When others are elated, we too feel elation.

⬇️ 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 and draining. For helping professionals, distress empathy is correlated with burnout and compassion fatigue.

- Research also shows that others don't feel empathy from us, when we are feeling distress empathy. Imagine sharing something worrying with a friend, and that friend becomes equally worried. It no longer feels soothing or helpful to share with them; instead we end up having to let them know we are okay, so they will feel better. Distress empathy also sometimes causes us to give advice, dismiss, or otherwise try to 'fix' others who are having difficult feelings- 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 feel are similar to us: people in our racial or ethnic and gender identity affinity groups.

💡 When it is helpful:

When we feel the distress of another, this can spur us to action. We often feel urgently that we need to do something. Imagine the urgency to protect a harmed animal, or protest family separation policies after seeing crying children and mothers.

What about when we don't feel empathy?

Often when we are not feeling empathy for someone, it is because we have judgments about them. Judgments can also take the form of stigma, for particular groups or conditions, or negative biases (unconscious or conscious). Not feeling empathy:

Often when we are not feeling empathy for someone, it is because we have judgments about them. Judgments can also take the form of stigma, for particular groups or conditions, or negative biases (unconscious or conscious). Most of us deeply want to be empathic with all people. For many of us, it is one of our core values. For this reason, we don't refer to empathy as a feeling, we refer to it as a practice.

Sometimes, not feeling empathy is useful, for example when we need to protect ourselves from someone, move away from danger, or protect someone/ something else.

Cognitive empathy (perspective taking): This is **imagining** what others feel; taking their perspective; really trying to understand what they are going through. This type of empathy is characterized by curiosity, kindness and humility.

💡 Helpful aspects:

- Perspective taking empathy is completely non-judgmental. It 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. In this way, it is an important equity practice.
- 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.
- Unlike distress empathy, this type of empathy feels good to those we are with; it feels like deep acceptance, understanding, and unconditional positive regard.

⬇️ 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.

HOW TO MOVE FROM DISTRESS EMPATHY TO COGNITIVE EMPATHY



IN THE MOMENT OF DISTRESS:

- Name the feeling to ourselves ('aha...I'm feeling the sadness they are feeling')
- Remind ourselves of this person's strengths and resilience
- Remind ourselves this person has already been managing this, without us
- Call on our faith; prayer or spiritual beliefs ('this person has their own path; God is holding them')

LATER:

- Soothe ourselves with self-compassion exercises
- Talk with a supportive person about our feelings
- Seek therapy or other forms of healing if our distress empathy seems to happen often, or in particular circumstances (high distress empathy can be a sign we have unhealed parts of ourselves that get 'woken up' when someone is in a similar situation or state.)



HOW TO MOVE FROM NOT FEELING EMPATHY TO COGNITIVE EMPATHY



STRATEGIES:

- Imagine the person as a child
- Bring to mind positive experiences with another in the same group (anti-racist strategy)
- Imagine them as a family member
- Imagine this person as beloved by their family and friends
- Imagine commonalities with the person ('we are both parents')

