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Empathy Starts at Home!

By Manya Arond−Thomas

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"Create loving, accepting space around people and this will put irresistible pressure on them to grow to fill it"
Mac Andrews

"If you look to others for fulfillment, you will never truly be fulfilled. If your happiness depends on money, you will never be happy with yourself. Be content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you."
Lao Tzu

In the last issue, I talked about empathy as a core emotional competence for building relationships, influencing people, and getting buy−in based on the ability to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motives of another.

However, why is it that empathy is now recognized to be so important for personal resilience and well−being? It's because our ability to be empathic with others starts with our ability to be empathic towards ourselves!

Like so many other abilities and qualities that we've been taught (or admonished!) to practice with others -− charity, kindness, paying attention to others' needs first (also known as not being selfish), acceptance -− our ability to genuinely embody and demonstrate empathy depends on whether we can have it for ourselves.

Another way to think about empathy is through the lens of acceptance and non−judgment. Our ability to be empathic with

another clearly reflects acceptance and lack of judgment about them. Yet if we don't accept certain aspects in ourselves, how can we truly be empathic with others when we witness those same qualities in them?

Genuine and complete self−acceptance is a challenge for many people. Lack of empathy can show up as being hard on oneself (generally or specifically), or it can be a blind spot that is outside our awareness.

C.G. Jung named those aspects of ourselves that we disown as the "shadow self." Thus, while we may not recognize ourselves as

having certain "undesirable" traits, those are often the very things we non−empathically judge and reject in others.

Where do people commonly lack empathy towards themselves? There seem to be certain key areas, that when challenged by someone else or triggered by some action we ourselves have taken, provoke self−judgment:

− Things that challenge our competence (mistakes, areas where we don't feel competent that become apparent in day−to−day life such as conflict management, money, power and authority, emotional self−management, to name but a few)
− Values −- both those to which we subscribe and those which we reject
− Feelings that are uncomfortable or intolerable for us
− Characteristics we deem as undesirable

For example, if you have perfectionist tendencies you may be unforgiving towards yourself or others when mistakes are made. Or, if I violate a value I espouse such as fairness, integrity, or equality, I may judge myself harshly, as well as those whom I also perceive, rightly or wrongly, to violate that value.

Likewise, when we see certain behaviors that we attribute to characteristics or values we view as negative, it's a good bet that we'll have difficulty being empathic.

I had a client who, when she saw others seeking to acquire things for themselves, labeled - and rejected - that behavior as "selfish" and "greedy." Yet, on further inquiry, it turned out that she rejected her own "greediness", which was actually a desire to be more assertive in getting her needs and desires met. Thus, her

judgment grew out of a belief acquired in childhood, that attempting to get her needs met was selfish and greedy.

What's the value in paying attention to your personal empathy quotient?

1. When you are un−empathic and judgmental toward those things that consciously cause you trouble, it's difficult to look at them and work with them. With empathy, you can do just that, allowing yourself to develop greater self−efficacy and competence in those areas.

2. Becoming aware of your unconscious shadow self or blind spots gives you access to motivations, needs, and desires that may actually be a source of untapped power for you.

Remember my client who rejected "greediness"? When she reclaimed her own "greediness", she was able to act more fully on her own

behalf, achieve greater competence and authority in creating what she wanted and needed, thus enhancing her sense of personal power.

Would you benefit from being less hard on yourself? If so, ask yourself what judgments you make about yourself that might be limiting your effectiveness or your desired results? Then, practice releasing the judgment. Creating loving spaciousness in your self will certainly allow something new to emerge!

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A Global Empathy Deficit− 2 Lessons

By Patsi Krakoff, Psy. D.

"...We've got a budget deficit that's important, we've got a trade deficit that's critical, but what I worry most is our empathy deficit." - Interview in O Magazine with Barack Obama.

Perhaps this is not only a US national concern but a global crisis: people are dividing into camps and fighting one another with no mention of sitting down to dialogue.

We, as global human beings living on a shrinking planet, have to stop the insanity, start talking, and stop the fighting.

The fighting is not only among warring nations. It goes on in corporations, small businesses, between entrepreneurs, in schools, in neighborhoods, and in families. There is a lack of talking, listening, and empathizing between people. This is especially true when they are different from us in some way.

We lose patience with others not like us or not of the same viewpoint. We stop listening. And consequently, we lose our ability to understand and find solutions.

We are missing opportunities for talking and dialoguing about what really matters. Dialoguing of course means listening and hearing what the other person is saying. It is not a monologue. It requires more than listening−−it requires empathy.

Lesson # 1 in Empathy

Empathy has several ingredients. Most people understand empathy to be "walking in someone else's shoes." It is more than that. Information when communicated to us by another human being is processed through the limbic system in the brain, the center for emotions and memory.

The trick here is not to get lost in our own memories and emotions. This requires self−management so quick that it is out of our awareness. We sense that the reason we feel sad that our neighbor is telling us that their dog died is that we have also experienced loss and know what it must be like for them.

To summarize, lesson #1 of empathy has several parts: Take in information Process your personal emotional reactions Reorient yourself to the person and what they are saying Self−manage personal reactions and memories Ask questions such as, "Tell me more," and "How does that feel for you?" Don't assume that what they are feeling and experiencing is similar to your experiences Ask more open−ended questions, such as, "And...?" or, "What else?" Just listen Refrain from trying to fix things before step #2

Lesson #2 of Empathy

People usually have a tendency to jump in and want to do something to help too soon. They want to get out of their own discomfort by solving the problem. Often they don't take the time to really

understand what the real problem is before offering solutions. This is how many people come across as NOT being empathetic, when they actually are. They respond too quickly with the wrong solutions.

So, the next important step after lesson #1 (feel the feelings and just listen), is to communicate back to the person that you are hearing them on a deep and personal level.

Simply state back to the person some of what you've heard, without interpretation or distortion. This communication requires a deep and honest caring about how other people feel, avoiding judgments and any attempts to minimize the importance of feelings or offering advice.

Like so much, empathy begins with developing ourselves individually, permeates our families and is taught to our children, and then must be communicated with the leaders we entrust to deal with other countries. A continued lack of empathy will result in global degradation.

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