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<https://scmp.com/lifestyle/health-beauty/article/2134231/empathy-why-we-need-more-it-polarised-world-and-how>

Lifestyle/ Health & Wellness

Empathy: why we need more of it in a polarised world, and how to cultivate the human touch

Put yourself in the shoes of other people and it'll help you understand them and show them compassion; while studies suggest it may be a quality some of us are born with, empathy is also something we can learn and put into practice


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Published: 8:32pm, 22 Feb, 2018 ▾

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Having empathy with others can guide your moral development and influence positively your thoughts and decisions. Photo: Alamy

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), author Harper Lee writes, “you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it”.

Said by one of the main characters, Atticus Finch, to his daughter Scout after she returns from a difficult first day at school, this nugget of wisdom was intended to help the girl “get along better with all kinds of folks” and to open her eyes to the power of empathy.

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And indeed, this advice stays with Scout throughout the rest of the story, guiding her moral development and influencing many of her thoughts and decisions.

Empathy is sometimes described as “walking a mile in somebody else’s shoes”, and Dr Timothy Sharp, chief happiness officer at The Happiness Institute in Sydney, Australia, believes that the world needs more of it.

“In recent years, we’ve seen an increase in extremism and a polarisation of perspectives, in politics, human rights and more,” says Sharp, who is also adjunct professor at the University of Technology Sydney business school and RMIT University’s school of health sciences in Melbourne. “And while there are many possible explanations for these problems, I think one of the more credible is a lack of empathy and understanding.



Having empathy with others can go a long way. Photo: Alamy

“The more we can understand others, the more likely we are to respect and trust them and to accept the validity of their beliefs and practices. So, the way I see it, more empathy would lead to less hate and violence, greater compassion toward others, and more humane actions being taken by individuals and governments.”

According to psychotherapist Nivedita Raj Ramanujam, CEO and clinical director at Inner Compass in Hong Kong, empathy is also important as it has a survival function – it helps us build relationships and facilitates harmony and bonding in our social, personal and professional lives.



Psychotherapist Nivedita Raj Ramanujam.

But what exactly does empathy entail?

“When we empathise with others, we are able to make inferences about what they desire, know, feel, think, and intend,” says Ramanujam. “It allows us to take others’ perspectives, and reflect on, be aware of, and connect with, these views.

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“Empathy also helps us to reflect on our prejudices, biased judgments, generalisations, alternative realities and choices. Without it, we would not have abolished slavery or fought for social justice, nor would we question social conventions that undermine equality.”

Ramanujam says we pick up empathy in varying degrees as we interact with others, and that some people are more empathetic than others.



A healthy dose of empathy helps us to interact with others.

Photo: Alamy

“We view the world through our own cultural, moral and personal lenses,” she says. “Our fears, judgments, morality, inhibitions, personalities and memories impact our level of empathy.”

“Some types of individuals fear empathy, as it opens them up to being vulnerable to another person’s problems and world views, which may contradict with their views. In addition, flexibility, compassion and reflection exist in varying degrees in individuals.”

“Being highly judgmental and preoccupied with oneself makes it more challenging to be empathetic.”



If you want to cultivate empathy, my suggestion is to stop thinking that everyone thinks and acts like you do or would

Jeff Rotmeyer, ImpactHK

Some research suggests empathy may be in our genes. A small-scale study – carried out by the University of Cardiff in the UK and whose results were presented in November 2016 at the Society for Endocrinology’s annual conference in Brighton, southern England – found that people with low levels of oxytocin, also called the “love hormone” as it’s responsible for romantic attachment and parental bonding, suffer reduced empathy.

Another study, by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, and published in 2011 in the journal *Proceedings in the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS), revealed that the most empathetic people possess a variation of the oxytocin receptor gene.

The most empathetic, that is, the ones who got an accurate read on others’ emotions, had two copies of the G allele gene (GG). On the other hand, people who showed to be less empathetic either had one G (AG) or no G allele (AA).



Dr Timothy Sharp, chief happiness officer at The Happiness Institute in Sydney, Australia.

That said, empathy is something that anybody can cultivate. “Empathy is at the heart of being humane,” says Ramanujam. “Volunteering, charity work, encouraging the expression of different voices, prioritising caring for others, and sharing one’s time and resources are all great ways to cultivate empathy.”

“It’s also important to look at how we relate to ourselves. If we’re unforgiving and critical of ourselves and intolerant of our own failings, being empathetic will feel more challenging, because our behaviour towards others is a reflection of how we see ourselves.”

Hong Kong-based schoolteacher Jeff Rotmeyer has a similar view. In 2014, the 40-year-old started ImpactHK, a registered charity, with the goal of giving the homeless in Hong Kong new opportunities. He says that empathy is about showing kindness, listening more, and judging less.

“It’s understanding that people make decisions for a reason,” he says. “One of our biggest challenges at ImpactHK is overcoming stereotypes of the homeless by people who’ve never even spoken with a homeless person.”



Schoolteacher Jeff Rotmeyer.

“I personally don’t pretend that I could ever truly know the pain or feelings that people face – which is essentially what empathy means – but if you want to cultivate empathy, my suggestion is to stop thinking that everyone thinks and acts like you do or would. Stop measuring people based on their faults, and instead, use your strengths to bring out the best in people.”

Ultimately, empathy connects us, which is something we should all work towards for our own emotional health.

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Says Sharp: “When we understand others we’re more likely to accept them; and when we accept them we’re more likely to have positive feelings for them [and ourselves]. Feeling that we’re connected and feeling that we [and others] belong have been proven to boost happiness and well-being.”