

WHY

EMPATHY

WHEN ASKED TO NAME the most important characteristics of a successful adult, I reply that there are several, but I always emphasize empathy. Being empathic means being able to place oneself inside the shoes of another person and to see the world through that person's eyes. As my colleague Sam Goldstein and I have discussed in our books about resilience, empathy is one of the most vital skills in any relationship and is imbedded in the mindset of the successful person.

When I use the word "successful," I define it not in terms of income level or social status. While these may be important variables, I am more interested in contentment with one's life, in the ability to strive for excellence and not be derailed by mistakes, to relate comfortably with others, and to help others feel special and appreciated.

Empathy implies that you consider how other people perceive situations, how they perceive you, and how they would describe you. If a person is lacking in empathy, he or she is likely to misread what is transpiring in a situation and misunderstand the intentions of others. It is not surprising that social scientist Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* and *Social Intelligence*, listed empathy as one of the main components of both of these intelligences.

Many individuals consider themselves empathic when, in fact, that is not the case. Achieving empathy requires diligence and thoughtfulness. Typically it is easier to be empathic toward people who agree with us or toward children who do what we request. Yet, if we truly want others to work cooperatively with us, we must consider their perspective as well as *their perceptions of us*. Therefore, the person striving to be empathic is guided chiefly by two questions:

➤ **"In anything I say or do, what do I hope to accomplish?"** Many people are able to answer this question easily enough; it basically focuses on one's goals and/or objectives.

➤ **"Am I saying or doing it in a way in which the other person will be most responsive to hearing and listening to me?"** I have witnessed countless examples of well-meaning parents, teachers, and businesspeople saying or doing things that actually work *against* their goals.



For instance, the parents of a temperamentally shy daughter (we now know that many youngsters are born shy or cautious) constantly implored her to make friends. Understandably, their goal was for her to develop friendships. Their anxiety led them to frequently ask her, “Did you speak with any kids in school today?” and “Did you invite anyone over to play?”

When this child was out with her parents and encountered people they knew, she would bashfully glance down. In prodding her to say hello, the parents barely disguised their anger and frustration. Of course, this actually increased her withdrawal. All of us want our children to be socially adept, but how would we feel if we were shy and were constantly chided, especially in front of others, to speak up and not be so shy?

A more empathic approach for these parents would be to tell their child privately, “I know that it isn’t easy for you to say hello. A lot of kids have the same difficulty. But maybe together we can figure out what will begin to help, since many kids as they grow find it easier to say hello to others and learn what to say to their friends.” A simple statement such as this, which contains a heavy dose of compassion and hope, can establish a foundation for a child to feel increasingly accepted. This allows a child, with the assistance of parents, to develop strategies for being less withdrawn and shy; it also promotes the notion that problems invite problem solving, which is an integral belief involved with becoming more resilient.

Recognizing Roadblocks to Empathy

Some individuals have an easier time than others in developing empathy. But I be-

lieve it is a skill that can be nurtured, even in those children and adults who might be considered as having an “empathy deficit.” First, it may be helpful to examine the obstacles we may face as we take steps to improve this skill. Becoming aware of these obstacles will make them easier to manage.

› **A lack of models.** If we grew up in a home where our communications were not validated and we were told how we should feel or not feel, it is more difficult to learn to take the perspective of another person. While having empathic parents does not guarantee that we will develop that quality, it is certainly an important factor.

I recall a family therapy meeting in which a teenage girl mentioned that she felt very depressed. Her mother responded, “But there’s no reason for it. We give you everything you need and we’re a loving family.” The mother meant to be



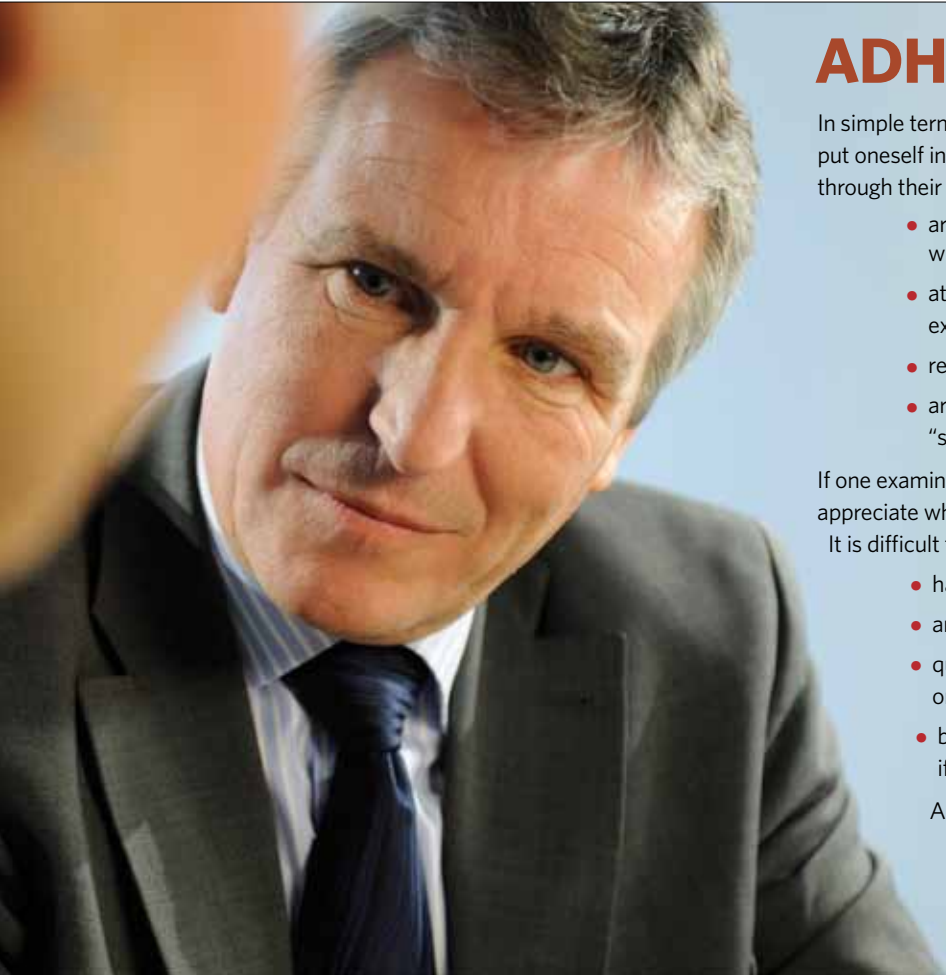
reassuring, but her response led the girl to withdraw further. If the mother had shown more empathy in validating her daughter’s words (such as, “I’m glad you could let us know how you feel; together we can try to figure out what would help you to feel less depressed”), I am certain her daughter would have been more responsive. The girl would also have been exposed to someone demonstrating empathy.

› **Being upset, angry, or disappointed in people.** Individuals who are angry often say hurtful things to their children, their spouse, or others that they would not have said if they were less stressed and frustrated.

I was seeing a shy, socially immature seven-year-old boy in therapy when he received an invitation to a classmate’s birthday party—a rare event for him, so he was very excited. The party turned disastrous when several boys told him he didn’t belong. When his mother came to pick him up, she saw him seated by himself, looking withdrawn and sad. Her anxiety and frustration surged and she said, “No wonder you don’t have any friends, you always sit by yourself!” Immediately she wished to take back her words, especially as she saw her son’s tears. She cried as she described this situation to me. Her anxiety and disappointment had interfered with her capacity to empathize with her son’s plight and offer the support he needed.

› **I’m right, you’re wrong!** Some individuals have a reflex negative reaction toward anyone who has an opinion different from theirs. Their entire demeanor suggests that they are poised for attack. An intense need to be right can blind a person from

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ADHD and Empathy

In simple terms, empathy may be defined as the capacity to put oneself inside the shoes of other people and to see the world through their eyes. Empathic people:

- are able to take the perspective of others even when they disagree.
- attempt to understand how their words and deeds are experienced and how others would describe them.
- reflect upon and take responsibility for their behavior.
- are able to realistically assess and appreciate the “social scene.”

If one examines characteristics often associated with ADHD, one can appreciate why many individuals with ADHD struggle with empathy.

It is difficult to assume the perspective of another person when we:

- have trouble “reading” social cues.
- are impulsive, frustrated, or moody.
- quickly interpret the actions of others as withholding or unfair.
- believe that others are not listening to us, especially if they don’t agree with our point of view.

An adult patient I saw for ADHD treatment summed up his improved sense of empathy this way: “It wasn’t until I could slow down and realistically separate what I was feeling from the intention of others that I could become a more empathic person.”

seeing other perspectives. It is difficult to empathize with others when we are constantly defensive and unwilling to listen.

Strategies for Strengthening Empathic Skills

Given these potential obstacles, what can we do to strengthen empathy? As Sam Goldstein and I highlight in *The Power of Resilience*, I believe that if we can keep these guidelines in focus and practice them regularly, we can achieve greater capacity for empathy.

› **Accept that empathy is a vital skill for successful relationships.**

This acceptance typically demands that we must be very clear about what empathy is and is not. Some people confuse being empathic with giving in or not being assertive. Empathy has nothing to do with giving in. One can be empathic and yet disagree with another person. One can be empathic and validate what another person is saying yet hold an entirely different view.

For instance, a student accused a teacher of not being fair when he had to serve detention for insulting other students. He had already received a warning. Rather than becoming defensive, the teacher said, “I know you think I’m not being fair. So, I think it’s important for us to review what led up to the detention, especially since I would not like to see it happen again, and I don’t want you to think I’m not being fair.” By first validating the student’s perception, the teacher created a climate in which this student was less defensive and more open to listening to the teacher’s point of view, resulting in the student eventually taking responsibility for his own behavior.

› **Try viewing yourself the way others view you.** In my workshops I offer the following exercise as a way to strengthen empathic ability. If my talk is for teachers, for example, I ask them to use a few words to describe both a teacher they liked and a teacher they did not like when they were students. Then I ask a few questions:

- If I interviewed your students and asked them to describe you, what words would you hope they use to describe you?
- What words would they *actually* use?
- How close are the two sets of words?
- What changes can you make to help close the gap between how you hope to be described and how you actually are?

Parents and partners can try this exercise, too. It emphasizes that each and every interaction with others creates a perception of us, one that plays a large role in determining how comfortably and cooperatively they will relate to us.

› **Treat others as we would want to be treated.** Ask yourself: When I say or do things with my child (partner, employee, patient), would I want anyone to say or do things to me in the same way?

I recall observing a young child spilling a glass of milk in a restaurant. His father slapped his hand and said, “What’s the matter with you? Use your brains!” I wondered how that father would have felt if he had spilled something and someone had slapped his hand and yelled at him. Would the father have learned anything or would he mainly be resentful?

› **Practice honest self-reflection.** If we find ourselves constantly at odds with others, if our relationships are marked by anger and stress, if others tend to tune us out, then it is advantageous to engage in honest self-reflection.

A father with whom I was working regularly recited to his son a list of things that he thought needed improvement (e.g., homework being done on time, keeping a cleaner room, having better friends). His son's behavior did not change. The father said, "He doesn't listen to me!" I asked how he would feel if someone recited the same list to him night after night. It was as if a revelation struck this father: "I would probably do what my son does. Who wants to hear one negative thing after another?" Consequently, the father began to focus on things his son did well, striving to lessen comments that his son experienced as nagging.



Their relationship improved noticeably.

Self-reflection can help us to appreciate what triggers our anger or disappointment, how we can speak with people so that they will listen to us even when we are frustrated with them, and how we would like others to treat us. In this process of self-reflection and honesty, we may require the support and insight of an objective person, perhaps a friend or relative with whom we feel comfortable.

If the obstacles persist, we should seek the guidance of a counselor or therapist. And remember, if you have struggled for years with problems pertaining to empathy, it may take a while to change. Don't become discour-

aged. I believe very strongly that the benefits of being empathic and having satisfying personal and professional relationships warrant whatever time and energy are required to accomplish this goal. 🎯