

What does empathy mean to you?

Collectively the understanding of empathy, from the group of women who provided their feedback, is that it is the act/ability/process of connecting with another and having a deep understanding of another's feelings free from expectation. It is a process that is beyond the mental or intellectual. It may begin with a "desire to understand more about that inner-matrix-of-things*", or a curiosity". It is associated with something beyond words and cognition, "with silence and eye contact, and an open heart". It requires an emptying of self, and patience, humility, compassion, mindfulness. It is a capacity to deeply listen. A capacity to sense, it is having spaciousness.

Empathy can be current or reflective.

It offers alternative perspectives for understanding and enquiry, supporting the growth of individuals and community.

It can support the process of building effective and sustainable communities. It can overcome prejudice, builds the means for proper support, free from judgment.

It provides a tool for positive change.

It can be broadened beyond human-to-human connection, to include all sentient beings, land.

It can be easier to feel empathetically with another's painful experiences.

It can be misused.

It can trigger our own trauma.

And raises questions... can we really understand another's experience?

*One participant described empathy as looking beyond how a person interacts with the external world, and looking at the inner matrix of a person, which is the "complex web of things that weaves each person's way of seeing and being in the world: stuff like culture, past experience, held traumas, subconscious patterns, beliefs and world-view, feelings, the influences of significant people in one's life, hopes, inner narratives".

Questions I pose after engaging in these responses:

- What is the benefit of empathy for ourselves?
- What is the benefit of empathy externally in society?
- What is the benefit of empathy to others?

What are the barriers to the use of empathy?

Fear has been raised as a significant barrier to the use of empathy; people often fear what we do not know, and we ignore what we fear. This creates ignorance.

Living in a western “neo-liberal functionalist capitalistic society”, creates a number of barriers to being able to engage in empathy. We are pitted against each other, in a ‘survival of the fittest’ and individualistic clash. The schooling system, and media add to the blockade between people, building propaganda. We are driven by greed, and driven away from our innate understandings of connection to nature. We are disconnected from community. We are a worn out society. We can so easily lose faith and hope. We are rushed. Our yearnings are unmet. Our habits block.

These factors build big barriers to empathetic engagement.

Questions I pose after engaging in these responses:

- Does empathy in it's self strengthen and support our own wellbeing and colour of our life?
- In this age, is it a rebellious act to engage with people empathetically?
- How can we heal the wounds of fear and distrust?
- Language can act as a barrier to connection, especially the use of words like ‘them/us’, how can we be mindful of the language we use?
- “We as a species are losing the art of listening as we rush all over each other on our quest to express ourselves.” As a society/within western culture, people are losing senses... we are losing our hearing, we are losing our sense of touch and kinesthetic appreciation... but our sight is becoming stronger. Our vision is what we rely on. Does that add to the barriers of using empathy? Are we seeing too much and thus engaging in what we see in different ways? Does empathy require all our senses? And are there other senses that are beyond science that can support empathy?

What sustains empathetic connections?

I am most excited by the shared thoughts around the tools and actions and sparks of light that sustain empathy. Reading through all the responses make me teary (and I have read them a number of times, and the tears well each and every time).

Collectively we believe that deep listening sustains empathy. Supporting the growth of interpersonal connections and sharing experience with others, whether it is within our own communities or stepping out and engaging with strangers.

Being in nature and connecting with land. Engaging in rituals and ceremonies and cultural/collective celebrations. Engaging and connecting with culture.

Being mindful, connecting without agenda, accepting uniqueness.

Further developing our own sense of self, and being actively and continuously critically aware of self. Stripping ourselves of our own prejudices. Emptying the self to receive free from expectation.

Furthering our own knowledge of the world, sharing empathy as a way of life, sharing values, maintaining our integrity, building a sense of belonging.

Laughing, smiling, crying, hugging, playing.

Developing and strengthening imagination, connecting with narrative, remembering.

Curiosity, enquiry; aliveness in our thought, our breath, our body.

Questions I pose after engaging in these responses:

- What role does vulnerability hold in relation to empathy?
- How do we build community when our current societal structures make it so hard?

I want to end with this quote from one of the responses:

I have no direct experience of ritual or ceremony. But I recently began to consider the reason for these to exist and what they do for culture and community. One thing I assume they do is help people to remember. Remember where they are from, why they are here, thus ritual is carried through generations to carry the stories. This then takes me into the power of stories and how these may foster and support empathy. Story and narrative connects us to our soul. It invites imagination and we engage with feeling as opposed to just mental cognitive thought. So if story fosters feeling can this nourish empathy?