

Explainer: What is empathy?

By The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.13.17

Word Count **895**

Level **940L**



A sticky note is filled out to be placed on "Wall of Empathy" at a Bay Area Rapid Transit station in San Francisco, California, November 14, 2016. The "Wall of Empathy," similar to the "Subway Therapy" wall in New York City, allowed people to express messages of empathy and support following the 2016 presidential election. AP Photo

Empathy is the ability to share and understand the feelings, or emotions, of others. It is constructed of different parts, each of which is associated with its own brain network.

There are three different ways to think about empathy. First, there is affective empathy. This is the ability to share the emotions of others. For example, someone watching a scary movie may feel scared when a character is scared.

Second, there is cognitive empathy. This is the ability to understand the feelings of others. A good example is a counselor who understands the emotions of people who they talk to but does not always share those emotions.

Finally, there is emotional regulation. This refers to the ability to control one's emotions. For example, doctors need to control their emotions when operating on a patient.

Empathy is not the same thing as trying to feel or copy someone else's emotions. Nor is it sympathy, which involves feeling concern for the suffering of another person and a desire to help.

Empathy has been observed in many non-human primates and even rats.

Greater Empathy To Help Someone

Empathy is important. It helps us respond appropriately to different situations.

There is research showing that greater empathy leads to more helping behavior. However, this is not always the case. You might, for example, think about someone who sees a car accident and is overwhelmed by emotions to the point where they are not able to help the person in pain.

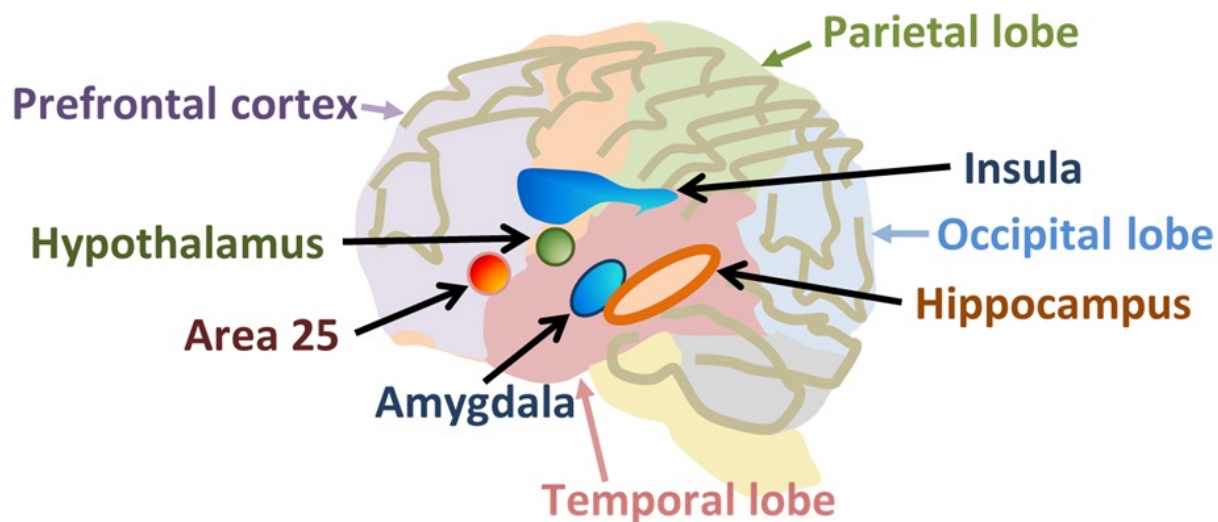
Empathy may not always be positive either. For example, strong empathetic feelings for members of our own family might lead to hatred toward those we see as a threat. The same applies to our own social or racial groups. People who are good at reading others' emotions might also deceive others for their own benefit.



Measuring Affective Empathy

Empathy is often measured with surveys. These typically ask people to indicate how much they agree with statements.

Agreeing or disagreeing with the statement, "It affects me very much when one of my friends is upset," would measure affective empathy. "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision," would measure cognitive empathy.



There may be brain differences between people with different empathy levels. People who score higher on affective empathy have more gray matter in one part of their brain. People who score higher on cognitive empathy have gray matter in a different area. Gray matter is made up of nerve cells. They are located in an area of the brain that help control emotions.

Selective Behavior

Research shows we typically feel more empathy for members of our own group. This can include a racial group. One study scanned the brains of participants while they watched videos of each other in pain. The participants were either white or Chinese. People's brains reacted less when the person in pain looked less like them.

We also feel less empathetic when people who act unfairly are in pain. People even experience pleasure when a rival sports team fails.

In some situations, it could be helpful to feel less empathy. For example, in war, it might be better to feel less empathy.

We conducted a study asking people to watch videos from a violent video game. In the game, a person was either shooting innocent people or enemy soldiers. In other words, the person was either being violent in a way that was justified or could not be justified. While watching the videos, people had to pretend they were killing real people.

A brain area active when we harm others was active when people shot innocent people. The same area was not activated when people shot the soldier that was trying to kill them.

Studying How People Control Their Emotions

The results give us a peek into how people control their emotions. They might help show how people become used to seeing violence or why some people feel more or less guilty about harming others.

Still, we do not always feel less empathy for those who aren't members of our own group. In our recent study, students had to give either money or painful electrical shocks to students from the same or a different university. People felt better about rewarding members of their own group. However, they felt equally bad about harming both groups.

These results seem right from what we see in daily life. We generally feel happier if our own group members win something, but we are unlikely to harm others just because they belong to a different group.

As human beings have evolved, the brain has become highly adaptive to different types of situations. Having empathy is very useful, as it often helps to understand others so we can help or deceive them. However, sometimes we need to be able to switch off our empathetic feelings to protect our own lives and those of others.

Pascal Molenberghs is a senior lecturer in social brain science at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia.

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-6].

Empathy is not the same thing as trying to feel or copy someone else's emotions. Nor is it sympathy, which involves feeling concern for the suffering of another person and a desire to help.

Why does the author compare empathy with sympathy?

- (A) Because they both have to do with the feelings of others.
- (B) Because they are both about copying other emotions.
- (C) Because they both have to do with making others suffer.
- (D) Because they are both about trying to feel other emotions.

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Greater Empathy To Help Someone."

Empathy is important. It helps us respond appropriately to different situations.

Which word could replace "appropriately" without changing the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) emotionally
- (B) rapidly
- (C) properly
- (D) intelligently

- 3 Read the sentence from the second paragraph of the article.

There are three different ways to think about empathy.

How does this sentence contribute to the article?

- (A) It introduces the idea that there is more than one type of empathy.
- (B) It establishes that thinking is the most important part of empathy.
- (C) It helps explain why there is a problem with feeling empathy.
- (D) It establishes that empathy consists of three different steps.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Studying How People Control Their Emotions."

However, sometimes we need to be able to switch off our empathetic feelings to protect our own lives and those of others.

Which paragraph from the article helps develop this idea?

- (A) Empathy is often measured with surveys. These typically ask people to indicate how much they agree with statements.
- (B) We also feel less empathetic when people who act unfairly are in pain. People even experience pleasure when a rival sports team fails.
- (C) In some situations, it could be helpful to feel less empathy. For example, in war, it might be better to feel less empathy.
- (D) These results seem right from what we see in daily life. We generally feel happier if our own group members win something, but we are unlikely to harm others just because they belong to a different group.