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Achieving Empathy

THE DEEP DIVE

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Most people are familiar with snorkeling and scuba diving, either through direct participation, interest or general knowledge. These are two examples I utilize to help clients differentiate between sympathy and empathy. Throughout my career, I have had the pleasure of treating a wide range of clientele: the obstinate teenager, the couple in turmoil, the existential crisis, and the forensic client, just to name a few. What did they all have in common? They all needed to understand empathy, and more importantly, how to achieve it. While sympathy is comforting to those in pain, I liken it more to the distant observation of snorkeling. You are safely engaged in a situation yet observing it from a distance. There is an understanding of the circumstances, but it is more superficial in nature than empathy. Imagine floating on the surface of the ocean water admiring the beauty of the sea life below. Certainly, this is emotion provoking, but it does not match the substance of experiencing that same scene up close and personal. The visual, visceral and tactile experiences resulting from immersion within that environment constitute a deeper experience. This tends to be an effective metaphor when embarking upon the journey of teaching empathy.

Being “sorry” for someone does not imply that you lack caring and concern for their circumstances. However, conveying true empathy requires more emotional submersion and a desire to establish connection on a level that we often avoid in our day-to-day lives. Why? Because it tends to involve a conscious commitment that can be rather exhausting. Ask most psychotherapists how they feel after a long day of seeing back-to-back clients --- totally depleted. Emotional, spiritual and/or physical replenishment tends to be the remedy. Depending on whom you are talking to, some contend that experiencing empathy requires someone to actually have been in another person’s situation. There is no doubt that this is helpful, but it is not a guarantee that empathy is achieved. Like any skill, achieving empathy does take motivation, effort, awareness, and oftentimes a willingness to take a risk.

Personally, I feel empathy is a core concept in many of the treatment plans I formulate. Admit it, we can all be self-absorbed and me-centric beings at times. Please do not misunderstand, I am not suggesting that we pour unbridled empathy into every situation we encounter; that would be nearly impossible and exhausting to the point of incapacitation. Some people are more naturally empathic than others, while some are incapable of



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achieving empathy. Most tend to fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum. If we view our dispersing of empathy as gears that we shift in and out of, we can then apply the appropriate levels of empathy to various situations. But first, we must learn it. Learning the definition of empathy, which includes terms like “infuse, understand, vicarious and sensitive” is a good starting point. Clearly, that is the easy part. The next steps of the journey tend to be more daunting and call for experiential transformation to put oneself in another’s proverbial shoes.

In working with court-ordered clients, specifically sex offenders, learning and integrating empathy is a must. For those who have victimized others, it can be very threatening to closely examine the pain one has caused to both direct and indirect victims. However, once this is achieved, a critical aspect of relapse prevention planning is accomplished. Typically, the more egregious the behavior the longer the journey to achieve a clinically satisfactory level of empathy. “Honor those you have hurt in all that you do,” is the mantra of my forensic program. For those who seek out clinical services voluntarily, we tend to assume that the empathy journey is less arduous. Realistically, this is not always the case.

I am of the belief that empathy changes lives. I have been fortunate to see people establish connection and repair they never thought was possible before learning to be empathic. I have also seen relational dynamics fall into ruin or simply remain status quo because the empathy goal was not achieved. We often think about others and their respective life paths but it is only when we work to achieve deeper understanding of their experiences and all associated emotions that we come closer to actually “getting them” at a level they will feel. Empathic individuals tend to exude the ability to understand the other person’s plight and, as a result, they are more likely to be met with a reciprocal desire to engage and be vulnerable.

Empathy is not a secret, yet when you look around, it is apparent that we are not spreading the word. Empathy can change the world; it really can. Think of people like Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, the Dalai Lama, and many others who have used a strongly rooted position of empathy to change the world. We have a long way to go, but we can all make a difference in the larger scheme of things if we embrace the empathy journey.

What do you say? Throw it into gear, hook up your scuba tank, and take a journey that promises arrival at a life-changing destination!