

Empathy: Turning Feelings and Beliefs into Action

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In my workshops and writings I have consistently emphasized the importance of empathy as an essential skill for enriching our lives. In books I have co-authored with my close friend and colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, such as *Raising Resilient Children* and *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, we devote chapters to the concepts of empathy and empathic communication as key ingredients involved in the development of positive relationships and resilience.

Psychologist Dr. Daniel Goleman has highlighted empathy as an integral component of both “emotional intelligence” and “social intelligence.”

My first two website articles, which were written in February and March, 1999, examined the concept of empathy. The selection of this topic for my inaugural website articles reflected the significance of this concept in my philosophy and approach. I have returned to the theme of empathy on a number of occasions, including my September, 2010 article in which I suggest that if our children are to become empathic, it is essential for the adults in their lives to model empathy rather than just preach about it. I cited an article authored by Maia Szalavitz that was published on the *Time* website in which she observes, “A child’s capacity for empathy can further be encouraged when parents model empathetic behavior themselves. When parents treat other people with compassion, selflessness, and a lack of judgment, children copy those behaviors.”

Modeling empathy is not mutually exclusive from providing children with exercises that encourage them to consider the feelings of others and to reflect upon the ways in which their actions are experienced by others. Carefully planned exercises, free of lecturing/preaching, can serve as powerful techniques to assist our children to take the perspective of other people and appreciate the world through their eyes. Empathy is not only a crucial dimension of a “resilient mindset,” but I believe it is a vital foundation for such behaviors as compassion and caring.

A Viewpoint about the “Limits of Empathy”

Given my interest in strengthening empathy both in ourselves and others, I was eager to read a recent article by David Brooks, the renowned author and Op-Ed columnist

for the *New York Times*. The article, which appeared in the *Times*, was titled “The Limits of Empathy.” I quoted David (since we bear the same last name I am using his first name throughout this column to avoid any possible confusion about whose opinion is being expressed) in my May, 2011 article in which I cautioned that an overemphasis on grades and test scores contributed to an inordinate amount of stress in our youth. I was especially drawn to David’s observation, “When we raise our kids, we focus on the traits measured by grades and SAT scores. But when it comes to the most important things like character and how to build relationships, we often have nothing to say. Many of our public policies are proposed by experts who are comfortable only with correlations that can be measured, appropriated and quantified, and ignore everything else.”

I interpreted David’s statement as a challenge to the notion that test scores should be used as the main criteria by which to assess the effectiveness of learning and education. Rather, he advocated that we remove our blinders and look beyond these scores as we attempt to evaluate what is truly significant in the overall development of children and what are the personal characteristics and skills that will serve them best as they navigate the many challenges of life.

In his current article, David describes the burgeoning interest in the topic of empathy as reflected, for example, in the increased number of books devoted to that subject. He observes, “People who are empathetic are more sensitive to the perspectives and sufferings of others. They are more likely to make compassionate moral judgments.” However, he then offers the following intriguing viewpoint:

The problem comes when we try to turn feeling into action. Empathy makes you more aware of other people’s suffering, but it’s not clear it actually motivates you to take moral action or prevents you from taking immoral action. In the early days of the Holocaust, Nazi prison guards sometimes wept as they mowed down Jewish women and children, but they still did it. Subjects in the famous Milgram experiments felt anguish as they appeared to administer electric shocks to other research subjects, but they pressed on because some guy in a lab coat told them to. Empathy orients you toward moral action, but it doesn’t seem to help much when that action comes at a personal cost.

David quotes others who have described empathy as a “fragile flower, easily crushed by self concern” and contends that empathy is insufficient. “It has become a way to experience delicious moral emotions without confronting the weaknesses in our nature that prevent us from actually acting upon them.” He continues, “People who actually perform pro-social action don’t only feel for those who are suffering, they feel compelled to act by a sense of duty. Their lives are structured by sacred codes.” Codes are seen to reside within religious, military, social, or philosophical arenas. David believes that these codes are what provide us with a sense of identity and belonging and that empathy is a “sideshow.”

More than a “Sideshow”

I agree that we all follow codes that guide our daily lives, some of which are more clearly articulated and more in our awareness than others. I think it is advantageous to identify these codes or principles so that we might gain a greater understanding and control of our actions. My concern with David’s comment is the relegation of empathy to the status of a “sideshow,” suggesting in essence that it is of little significance. It is true that certain “sacred codes” such as those that dictated the behaviors of the Nazi guards may diminish or even obliterate our capacity for empathy, but I believe that in the absence of empathy any of the codes to which we adhere will be characterized by a diminution in caring, and our behaviors will be dominated by a lack of kindness towards or concern for the well-being of others.

In contrast to those in Nazi Germany who followed a code of blind loyalty to the state that was devoid of compassion, I continue to be impressed by those individuals who rejected the existing barbarism of the Nazi codes, assuming enormous personal risks in which many lost their own lives to save others. Countless individuals continue to display this kind of heroism throughout the world today. In Nazi Germany the courage of non-Jewish individuals to protect the lives of their Jewish counterparts was acknowledged by their being declared “Righteous” by the state of Israel. Next to each plaque on the Avenue of The Righteous that leads to the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, the museum dedicated to documenting the Holocaust and memorializing its millions of victims, a tree has been planted honoring the non-Jew who saved Jewish lives. My wife and I have walked along the path of the Righteous and visited Yad Vashem. To do so

triggers many emotions and one cannot help but be inspired by those whose personal codes superseded the dictates imposed by the Nazis, placing them at perilous risk for retribution. I would surmise that these individuals were not only very courageous, but that their actions were guided by a high degree of empathy. Empathy alone does not insure courageous behaviors, but in most instances it is difficult to conceive of the emergence of such behaviors without the presence of empathy and compassion.

Most of us do not really know how we would react in certain situations that call for courage and going against the prevailing code. Most hope they will behave in a moral, ethical manner. Many of the participants in Milgram's study who continued to inflict pain were very upset by their behaviors afterwards. Whatever image we might hold of ourselves as caring individuals is strikingly called into question when we engage in hurtful behaviors. I think it would be of great benefit to identify and learn from the mindset of those who had the fortitude to resist codes that condoned despicable actions and instead adopted a code that respected others.

As a therapist I advocate that if we are to lead a resilient, moral lifestyle we must assume personal responsibility and personal control for our behaviors. I subscribe to the belief that our actions speak volumes for the kinds of people we are. If we possess the capacity for empathy but fail to apply this skill in challenging situations it is as if this skill does not exist. I believe this is the situation that David emphasizes in his article. However, rather than conceptualizing empathy as a "sideshow," I would argue that in order to initiate moral actions, children and adults must first develop empathy. It is empathy that serves as a basic ingredient for adopting more caring behaviors and for helping us to question those codes that are not in accord with moral, ethical activities.

Empathy, Moral Judgment, and Moral Behavior

We must be careful not to downplay the relevance of empathy, but rather to recognize that the development of this skill establishes the foundation for moral behaviors. Living and modeling a moral, responsible, compassionate life requires empathy, although, as noted, we must continue to find ways of putting this skill into action even in the face of intense obstacles. When Goleman discusses the importance of empathy, he does not cast it as an isolated skill, but rather places it within the context of other components of emotional and social intelligence that relate to actual behaviors.

In his book *Emotional Intelligence* Goleman quotes John Donne's famous lines, "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee," noting that Donne's position "speaks to the heart of the link between empathy and caring: another's pain is one's own." Goleman also emphasizes the work of empathy researcher Martin Hoffman "who argues that the roots of morality are to be found in empathy, since by empathizing with the potential victims—someone in pain, danger, or deprivation, say—and so sharing their distress that moves people to act to help them. Beyond this immediate link between empathy and altruism in personal encounters, Hoffman proposes that the same capacity for empathic affect, for putting oneself in another's place, leads people to follow certain moral principles. . . . Empathy underlies many facets of moral judgment and action."

Given Hoffman and Goleman's views, it is difficult to separate empathy from moral judgment and action. However, in considering David's position, we must recognize that as we model and provide activities for children that will nurture empathy, it is imperative that we include discussions related to the ways in which empathy can be used to direct our behaviors. I am aware that what children or adults predict they will do when confronted with hypothetical events may differ from how they will actually respond (e.g., I would guess that almost all of the participants in the Milgram study who increased the level of electric would not have predicted they would do so). However, even though predictions may not be accurate, it can still prove useful to engage our children in discussions about the different options one has available when faced with challenging situations or moral dilemmas. Such preparation can minimize disruption to our empathic skills and promote positive behavior.

A Therapist's Questions and Perspective

As a therapist I have witnessed first hand the benefits of empathy to enrich our relationships and our lives. I recall a division manager in a biotech company who was rather harsh in his judgment of the people who reported to him. His philosophy was, "If people do something wrong you should let them know about it, but if they do something right, it is part of their job and expected. I don't have to say anything when their work meets our standards." Given his attitude, it was of little surprise there was a high turnover rate in his division and a number of dissatisfied workers.

When I asked this manager such empathy-related questions as “What words would you hope your staff used to describe you?” and “How do you think they would actually describe you?” he initially dismissed the questions as unimportant. However, after I explained the reasons for my posing these questions, he began to reflect upon the impact his behaviors had on the individuals in his group and the words they would probably use to describe him. This reflection eventuated in his altering his interactions with them so that they might begin to describe him in a more favorable light and, as importantly, so that they might be more motivated and enthusiastic to remain with the company.

I have used questions similar to the ones I asked the division manager in my consultations with teachers and parents. I inquire how they hope their children/students would describe them and how they think they actually would. We explore the reasons that prompted them to select the particular words that they hope will be used to describe them. During the course of this discussion I always introduce the question of what actions they plan to initiate, a dimension that David argues is often lacking, by wondering what steps they plan to take so that the words they hope children will use to describe them will be in accord with the children’s actual words. In encouraging parents and teachers to formulate an action plan for change, I emphasize the role of empathy in this endeavor. In addition, I recommend they anticipate obstacles to the changes they intend to implement. Such anticipation allows them to be better prepared to modify their plans should that prove necessary. My goal in introducing these questions and exercises is to insure that empathy will lead to positive actions and people will be better equipped to handle setbacks and frustrations that often result in compromises to empathy.

A Concluding Thought about Empathy and Action

As a beginning therapist I was interested in different theories of therapy. I was especially intrigued with the ways in which a theory might guide what we actually say or do with our patients. If a theory did not offer specific, realistic guideposts that I could apply in my clinical practice it held little interest for me. Even today, I continue to be fascinated by the ways in which particular theories or particular skills determine the actions we take in our lives. If empathy is not translated into behavior it will indeed be a “sideshow.” However, when empathy serves as a guiding light for our behaviors,

showing us the path that leads to compassion and caring, it becomes a potent force that will improve the lives not only of our children but ourselves as well. The more we bring together theory, skills, and actions, the more we can engage in activities that permit us to lead purposeful, fulfilling, caring lives.

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