Textbook Reading Guide

Developing Empathy: A Biopsychosocial Approach to Understanding Compassion for Therapists and Parents

Preface

Overview and Beginning Reflections on Empathy

Introduction to Empathy

Empathy is often described as understanding someone's perspectives, or "putting oneself in the other person's shoes." (pp. xii)

Conversation Starters

Reflect on Manassis' personal example with the barista. Why was the barista able to practice empathy even though the author was being inconsiderate? Why is empathy sometimes difficult to embrace?

Paying It Forward

Remember that "empathetic behavior can have ripple effects." (pp. xii) People who experience empathetic behavior are more inclined to treat others with empathy. Each of us has the ability to "pay it forward" in small but significant ways.

As we seek to understand one another, we can learn empathy.

Challenges to Empathy

Our experiences, along with various obstacles and circumstances, can steer us away from empathetic actions. For example, sometimes we can treat a total stranger with more empathy than we would a family member. Situations like this, where our experience with a person may enhance or limit our empathetic actions, demonstrate contextual empathy.

Chapter 1

Perspectives on Empathy: Why is an Obvious Virtue so Elusive?

This chapter addresses the difficulties in practicing empathy consistently, as well as the varying views and definitions of empathy. According to Manassis, theories about empathy and its downsides are abound; real-life applications of empathy theories are more elusive.

Collective and Individual Well-Being: "I-Thou"

Advances in technology and education have led to societal shifts where individual well-being and advancement have taken the place of communities that focused on the well-being of all their members. Social emphasis on the importance of individual success and achievement contributes to disregard for those who may not be able to reach a given level of accomplishment—a phenomenon that does not help us practice empathy.

Social emphasis on the individual appears often in daily life, including these areas:

- The workplace, where individual performance determines promotions
- The economy, where poor individuals are blamed for lack of success and achievement
- Mass communication, where social media focuses on individual profiles (although we also now have more of an understanding of global issues that could possibly enhance our feelings of empathy)
- Fight or flight responses to threats (to self or family), where an inability to regulate emotions is detrimental to oneself and to relationships

Though societal trends towards individualism seem to preclude empathy, the opposite can occur. Manassis points out that individuals who are secure in their sense of self, demonstrate no preoccupation with themselves, and exhibit high self-esteem are in a better position to treat others well.

Psychological Perspectives of Empathy

Clinical psychology has used empathy as a tool to treat personality disorders focused on high self-absorption. In child development studies, empathy development can result in more secure parent-child attachments.

Positive psychology sees empathy not just as a tool to prevent or treat mental illness, but as a fundamental aspect to well-being—for oneself and for relationships.

"Humanity"—defined as "behaviors that show love, kindness, and social intelligence" (pp.7)—is linked to empathy. Empathy is part of a satisfactory life comprising positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (PERMA). Experiencing PERMA provides a positive sense of self that can project outwards to manifest positive behavior towards others.

The study of empathy is multi-faceted and includes perspectives from psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience. These and other disciplines have determined that empathy differs from other pro-social constructs (sympathy, self-transcendence, compassion, and altruism (pp.8-9)).

Review **Figure 1.1** on page 11 to study the psychological component processes of empathy which involves the following distinctions:

Emotional: "affective empathy," "lower-level empathy," "mirroring," and "emotional contagion" show that a person can feel distressed by another's distress or feel happy for another's joy. These characteristics do not require one to take perspective and have appeared in primates and in humans, including children and children with limited perspective-taking abilities (i.e., autistic children).

Intellectual: "cognitive empathy," "higher-level empathy," and "reconstructive empathy" show attempts to view the world from another person's perspective (i.e., "putting yourself in the other person's shoes").

Healthy Psychological Boundaries: "affective matching," "other-oriented perspective -taking," and "self-other differentiation" show a need to understand the other person, rather than just projecting one's own feelings or interpretations of those feelings.

Conversation Starters
Explain which aspect of empathy is most meaningful to you and why.

Arguments Against Empathy
As with any human phenomenon, empathy has its drawbacks:

- **Empathy** is not necessary for moral-driven judgment or behavior
- **Empathy**-guided behavior can be problematic (i.e., reinforcing norms that are not moral; promoting in -group biases and out-group exclusions)
- **Empathy** obscures understanding of actions that need to be taken for the sake of a person's best interests
- **Empathy** for more than one person may encounter conflicting or separate needs
- **Empathy** is used in a self-serving way

Empathy might have limitations, but it is still very useful.

Conversation Starters
Why don't we always engage in empathic behavior? Review the example of Marvin on pages 16–17 and revisit this question throughout the chapters in the book.

Chapter 2
Nature and Nurture: The Developmental Basis of Empathy

This chapter seeks to understand the factors that influence empathy development. Though researchers once thought that empathetic behavior was learned, developing research finds that the brain is naturally receptive and open to empathetic responses.

The interplay between nature and nurture factors in to our understanding of empathy.
- Nature ("constitutional factors")
- Nurture ("environmental factors")

Empathy and the Body

- **Mirror Neurons:**
  - We use mirror neurons to imagine how others feel and how we can respond to their feelings appropriately. Our responses can include our facial expressions, posture, and speech patterns, all of which begin to mimic those of the other person.
  - This mimicry is evidence that we have begun to "participate in another's lived story." Instead of approaching a situation in a purely objective way, we seek to understand and appreciate the subjective experience of the individual in the situation ("intersubjectivity").

- **HPA axis** determines our fight or flight response and is influenced by our early experiences/relationships.
  - ▷ **Fight or flight** is our body's response to perceived threat (outlined on pp. 30). When faced with a perceived threat, we will either confront the situation (fight) or avoid/flee the situation (flight).
    - ▷ Although *genetics* may predispose us to fight or flight tendencies, we are not doomed to a life without empathy because of our genetics. Caring, nurturing environments can counteract genetic predispositions for a lack of empathy; children can learn empathy.

Empathy and Sense of Self

Memory: Our capacity for empathy can be influenced by memories that the other person might trigger. For example, the person's resemblance to a parent or someone else in your past might determine whether you treat the other person with more or less empathy. (See the Danny and Arjun scenario on pp. 24; cover this mostly if you want to fully discuss the Danny and Arjun scenario on pp. 24; the father's lack of empathy when his son is acting out because it reminds him of himself when he was younger).

Kinship: We tend to show more consistent empathy to those who resemble us and our experiences; we tend to show inconsistent empathy to people who are not as similar.

Personal Development: Some theorists propose a stage approach to empathy development that begins in infancy and ending in the first two years of life. This theorist also proposes obstacles to empathy that align with his stages.

Conversation Starters

Ask students to read this quote from the text:

"Most of us are not consistently empathetic, genuinely empathetic, nor are we the opposite." (pp. 25)

What does this quote really mean? In what ways does the quote apply to you and your life?

Empathy and the Environment

- **Early Environment:** Our early relationships set the foundation for our later interactions and relationships. Trusting, caring interactions early in life will establish the belief that future relationships can be just as positive.
    - ▷ **Attachment theory and empathy**
        - ▷ Children who have **secure attachments** learn how to regulate their own distressing emotions through interactions with their caregivers and are more likely to care for others because of the care they have experienced in life.
        - ▷ Children with insecure attachments tend to experience less empathy from other people because they do not reciprocate that empathy. This likelihood further perpetuates the individual's insecurity and negative view of relationships.

            Attachment styles tend to persist across generations, so insecure attachment styles can reduce future generations' capacity for empathy.

- **Late Environment:** Parenting and expectations of behavior in later childhood has also been linked to empathy. Authoritative parenting tends to lead to the best empathy outcomes.
    - ▷ **Other environmental influences**
        - ▷ Peers, siblings, communities, and schools influence an individual's relationships, which are further related to empathy skills.
        - ▷ Contexts that may hinder empathy:
            - ▷ The psychological repercussions of bullying
            - ▷ Highly competitive school/athletic environments

Empathy and Emotional States

- **Fight or Flight Activation:** Activations can be long-term or temporary.
    - ▷ Psychological conditions where people are biased to perceive threat (aggression problems or anxiety); likely a gene-by-environment interaction
    - ▷ Physical discomfort: focus more on personal well-being than others'
    - ▷ Perceived scarcity of resources (food, money, or time)
        - ▷ Solely focused on getting the resource we want, which reduces our ability to plan for own and others' well-being; impulsivity and a lack of empathy become more likely.
        - ▷ Neglect others' needs/concerns
- **Hyper-Aroused Emotional State:** Emotional state that tends to suppress empathy via fight or flight activation due to a heightened focus on personal needs and a reduced focus on attention to others.
- ▷ **Hypo-Aroused Emotional State:** Emotional state that is seen less often. This state is seen as exhibiting callous, unemotional behavior (e.g., as with psychopaths).

Conversation Starters

Read Ashley's story (pages 32–33), which sums up the interplay among nature, nurture, and early/late life influences, and answer the questions that follow it.

Chapter 3
Social Influences on Empathy

> This chapter identifies and describes the ways in which social groups at all stages of life influence empathy. The social groups that surround us can support cooperative, empathetic behavior or encourage rivalry and competition.

Dyadic Nature of Empathy

Manassis writes, "When we describe empathy as the capacity to step into another's shoes, this idea highlights the dyadic nature of empathy" (pp. 38). A dyad is composed of two parts, whereby empathy can be a behavior in a two-way relationship. We can be empathetic by listening to a friend in need, or by relating to the grocery clerk exhausted from a long workday.

Despite these numerous opportunities for one-on-one (dyadic) empathy, we experience many more interactions as part of larger group settings. We have families, go to school and work, and engage with others within bustling organization, public, and community settings.

Interactions with these various "agents of socialization" influence and complicate our experiences with empathy over time. As Manassis notes, group interactions can reinforce our empathetic behavior by supporting its existence, or they can thwart our empathetic impulses by pushing us towards self-reward and other low-empathy behaviors.

Families and Small Groups

Adding a third person to a dyad—forming a triad or a small group—can upset the empathy experienced between two people by introducing competition for time, resources, and affection. In a threatened state, people are more likely to rely upon a flight or fight response and become hyper-aroused, curtailing the ability to think or act empathetically.

Negative group outcomes that harm empathy development include the following:
- *"Diffusion of responsibility"*: Lacking individual accountability for actions
- *Peer Pressure*: Pressuring group members to adhere to group norms can result in favoring insiders and excluding outsiders

Despite these risks to empathy, small groups and their inherent support systems can also offer more opportunities for people to develop empathy. Group strengths that are relevant to empathy and can also benefit families include the following:

- *Universality*: Sharing similar feelings
- *Altruism*: Extending help to others
- *Hope contagion*: Instilling hope in others
- *Relatability*: Developing better ways of relating to others socially
- *Cohesiveness*: Fostering feelings of trust, belonging, and togetherness with other group members
- *Self-understanding*: Knowing oneself and understanding one's actions, impulses, feelings, and needs
- *Expression*: Feeling secure in expressing/releasing strong feelings to the group

- Share about a time or situation where you experienced the above strengths within a group. Describe how these group strengths increased your empathy.
- Within your own family, describe if these strengths are present or absent. How might the presence or absence of these strengths contribute to your capacity for empathy?
  - ▷ How could changes in the family in which you grew up have changed your opportunities to develop empathy? If you don't think any changes would have helped you develop empathy (maybe you were raised in a highly empathetic family) describe why this is the case.
  - ▷ In some families, there may be a lack of empathy in the relationships. Reflecting on either personal experience or perceived experience, what other relationships would help individuals develop empathy?

Within families and small groups, systems develop. Among group members, these **family systems** establish behavior patterns:

- *Roles and responsibilities*
- *Closeness and distance in relationships*
- *Communication styles*
- *Family rules and norms*
- *Family problem-solving style*
- *Family openness to external influences*

Communities and Organizations

High-functioning communities and organizations benefit from a sense of fellowship and belonging. Such units recognize the interdependence of their members, valuing their varied roles for their unique contributions to the overall functioning of the group.

Within the communities and organizations, leaders coordinate members to strive for a common goal. Leaders encourage positive relationships and activities that foster empathy and perspective-taking so that members can value each other's contributions.

Country and Culture

Manassis writes, "There are two important aspects of culture in relation to empathy: the effect of cultural difference on empathy and the effect of cultural norms on empathy." (pp.48)

Though cognitive empathy ensures that people can understand differences and even empathize with someone of a different race or ethnicity, **cultural differences** impose difficulties on empathetic behavior.

Emotional responses tend to be stronger when behaving empathetically toward someone from one's own group.

Ethnocultural empathy is the ability of people (particularly people in the helping professions such as therapists, doctors, etc.,) to empathize across cultures; this ability can be measured using the **Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy.**

Similarities and differences in age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, disability, and sexual orientation can influence our empathetic responses to situations. Practicing respectful curiosity can help us to embrace the most empathetic response options.

Cultural norms have the potential to both positively and negatively affect our empathy levels.

Cultural norms can lower cultural levels of empathy in the following ways:

- Significant income gaps emphasize competitions (winners vs. losers) and negative attitudes towards people in poverty
- Materialism prioritizes the acquisition of goods over positive interactions with others
- Authoritarianism includes strict regimes and rules that leave little room for empathetic deviations from the status quo

However, cultural norms that include empathy can be related to positive social benefits such as:

- Reconciliation after systemic injustice
- Recognition of group members' interdependence that fosters a sense of community even among people of different backgrounds
- Reduction of negative views towards outsiders

Additional research can help us understand the neurochemistry and psychology underpinning our responses to in-and out-groups, how large organizations can function in a positive way, and how, realistically, we can overcome our prejudices to react and behave empathetically.

Chapter 4

Physical Aspects: Why Empathy Requires a Healthy Body as well as a Healthy Mind

This chapter focuses on the biological factors (such as brain chemistry, bodily comfort, physical states) that impact our relationship with empathy.

Treating ourselves well physically is an important precursor to treating others well. Unhealthy physical behaviors—neglecting to exercise, eating poorly, responding to fight or flight stressors, and destabilizing our emotions—can impair our ability to engage in empathetic behaviors. Accepting and appreciating our bodies can help with empathy toward oneself and others. Mindfulness, or being attentive and present, can help with positive behaviors.

Encouraging Self-Compassion

Various mindfulness exercises can help with us living in the present and appreciating moment-by-moment happenings. People can achieve this awareness through meditation, exercise, and/or prayer. "Centering" allows a person to be "in the moment," present, and fully engaged, which differs from focusing too much on the self. A healthy focus on being present can help us to also concentrate on our relationships with others.

Conversation Starters
How do you practice self-compassion?

Strengthening the Biological Substrates of Empathy

To behave empathetically, we require physical comfort. Physical discomforts such as hunger, over-satiation, sleep deprivation, or headaches can impair our ability to act empathetically toward others.

Illness, Disability, and Empathy

Illness triggers survival instincts that give us a more inward focus that primes us for fight or flight responses. These survival mechanisms override the neural circuits related to empathy. Certain medications can curtail this relationship even more.

Though illness can frustrate our sense of independence, it can also help us to realize that needing and relying on others for help is not a bad thing. Recognizing our interdependence with others may increase our capacity for empathy.

Think about the stories of Hank and Lois, which offer examples of how people sometimes deal with illness. Someone who is ill can find it hard to behave empathetically, which can in turn make it difficult for a caretaker to feel empathy. However, illness often offers insight into people's histories and past attachments. People who want to avoid feeling vulnerable may reject help and rely on their own decisions. On the other hand, people who exaggerate distress for the sake of attention may loudly complain about their illness and discomfort. Awareness of this range of coping styles can help caretakers practice empathy when comforting a sick person.

Social Determinants of Health

Overall health combines physical, mental, and social components. For example, even the act of eating can impact any one of these components. Hunger can lead to physical cravings and mental preoccupation with obtaining food, depleting our ability to think of others and their needs. Children born to malnourished mothers may experience weakened neural developments that influence their ability to behave empathetically. Limited access to healthy foods can result in more physical ailments and diseases, which can curtail our empathetic abilities. Meeting our needs for healthy eating can improve our overall health, giving us greater capacity for compassion, empathy, and a thoughtful society.

Chapter 5
Mental Aspects: Emotional Distress and *Not* Looking Out for Number One

This chapter focuses on common mental health symptoms that may inhibit an individual's capacity for empathy. Such symptoms can prevent individuals from focusing on others instead of themselves.

Treating Mental Illness

Treatment for mental illness has evolved throughout history. Recent treatments focus on promoting individuals' strengths.

For addressing mental health, Manassis discusses four important points:

1. Humans are complex beings, and it can be difficult to define how psychologically healthy people appear.
2. Treatment for mental health issues does not mean that a person will be psychologically healthy.
3. If treatment for mental health is not provided early, some individuals will have lasting impacts and impaired daily functioning.
4. Some individuals will show improved psychological well-being, even if their symptoms are not treated.

Individuals dealing with their own mental health problems are likely much more self-focused, which decreases their capacity to focus on others and their ability to demonstrate socially appropriate behavior/cognitions such as empathy.

Components of Empathy and Mental Health

Table 5.1 outlines how impairment of these components may impact empathy and mental health conditions. Though the chapter focuses on mental health conditions, each of us may feel many of these emotions or experience the situations outlined in the text.

Preoccupation with Oneself

Look at the story about Juanita. Juanita's self-focus limited herself from reaching out to others and instead contributed to her rejection of people who reached out to her.

Focusing on oneself can result in decreased capacity for empathy, as individuals who have self-focused rumination are less able to focus on and relate to others empathetically.

Preoccupation with oneself also happens when an individual feels regret or guilt, which often lead the individual to dwell on negative feelings rather than focusing on the needs of others.

Conversation Starters

Ask students to analyze this quote from the text:

"One important component of empathy is to transcend a focus on ourselves and our own survival" (pp.74)

How does this quote relate to what they've learned so far? How does it relate to the content in this chapter?

Learning from our past is an important part of life and of empathy. It is critical that we practice self-forgiveness to nurture our empathy and allow us to focus our attention towards others—something we cannot do if we are preoccupied with ourselves.

Motivation to Attend to Another Person

Reflect on Adam's story, which describes a career-focused father and husband who becomes an alcoholic.

One key point from Adam's story is that his external focus—an important facet of empathy—is his career, which is inherently not an empathetic focus. Because of this misdirected external focus, Adam does not recognize how his behaviors can impact others.

Conversation Starters

Ask students to analyze the following quote:

"...an empathetic person must make a consistent effort to attend to people encountered every day by day and moment by moment, whether they are 'important' with respect to future goals or not. Without this effort we tend to objectify others, seeing them as useful tools to aid our progress, or obstacles in our way." (pp.80)

Cognitive Perspective-Taking

Review the story about Nolton, a child with autism who struggles with perspective-taking, as do many individuals with autism spectrum disorder.

Individuals can improve their perspective-taking skills by identifying appropriate responses to others' situations and by practicing emotion recognition and conversational skills.

In awkward situations, individuals can ask themselves, "How did my words/actions make this person feel?" and "What could I have done differently to make this person more comfortable?"

Relating to Another Person Emotionally

Reflect on the story about Joel, who experienced extreme abuse and neglect as a child. Joel represents an example of the rare occasion when it may be difficult or impossible to experience full empathy based on the individual's past and personality. In these rare instances, the individual have the ability to understand the other's perspective but manipulate the situation to benefit themselves instead of focusing on the empathetic response.

Psychological Boundaries

In Keisha's story, Keisha's actions reflect her mother's desires rather than her own. As Keisha ages, she starts to argue with her mother about this habit.

Individuals high in empathy understand that while they can have an idea of how another person feels, they cannot fully know how another person feels.

To protect psychological boundaries, it is important that people practice appropriate closeness based on their role in the situation and the role of the other individual. People should also recognize what words, mannerisms, settings, and actions can help and hinder others in a given situation.

Someone who lacks appropriate psychological boundaries may avoid disagreements with friends because they fear having negative repercussions affect the relationship. In such situations, that person focuses more on maintaining the relationship instead of providing the honest support that is appropriate and needed for the relationship and the situations it faces.

Communicating Empathy

Review the story about Marco, a psychiatric student learning how to interview clients. His demeanor rarely matched his clients', causing problems in their interactions and relationships.

Our personal cognitive biases can prevent us from demonstrating empathy appropriately. We need to have flexibility in our thoughts when considering the causes for a certain situation (e.g., attributional biases). Not everyone with whom we interaction will react to a situation in the same way.

If we can identify and be aware of our own biases, we can practice the flexibility that will allow us to enhance our capacity for empathy.

Empathetic communication takes practice. The book outlines a few phrases that may be helpful in communicating empathy (pp. 87), such as "that must be very difficult for you." We can also communicate our empathy by mirroring the actions of the other person and listening attentively.

Chapter 6
Taming the Flight or Right Response

This chapter focuses on coping with the psychological aspects of fight or flight responses.

Conversation Starters

In small groups, students should discuss the possible outcomes of the scenario (on pp. 90-91) if the author had handled the situation in a different way (i.e., by "giving in" to her fight or flight response, by reacting in an angry and/or anxious way).

What are the implications of this scenario for the author's clients? Her son? Her own self?

Fear vs. Anger

Fear and anger result in physiological arousal, which triggers the increased adrenaline that leads to your fight or flight instincts. Once this arousal occurs, individuals respond in one of two ways:

1. The individual's panic decreases after the initial arousal, allowing for clearer thoughts, demonstrations of strength, or increased skill in the task needing to be accomplished.
   A. If anger elicited the arousal, the individual may be more likely to speak or act in ways that that are for the greater good, even if those actions result in personal risks.
2. The individual's panic or anger may increase after the initial arousal, resulting in negative responses with intense emotions.
   A. A mix of anger and fear could result in either extreme panic or rage; ultimately, the individual will be less likely to think clearly in the situation.

If an individual's response leans towards the situation described in #2, the individual should refrain from reacting to the situation until their emotions have subsided or decreased in intensity.

Anxiety and Empathy

Remember Richard's story, which provides an example of how someone's anxiety may make them appear and be less empathetic.

Anxiety typically "relates to a fear of being either physically harmed or humiliated," and as a result, the individual with anxiety tends to focus more on themselves and reaching their future. Such tendencies contribute to others' views of them as selfish or lacking empathy.

However, such views are based on the individual's emotional state at the time—not on the individual's character.

To avoid appearing inconsiderate when overcome by anxiety, people can learn coping mechanisms that allow them to "become more aware of others' feelings and therefore more capable of empathy."

- Anxiety Response: Avoidance. We can counter that avoidance by exposing ourselves to the anxiety-provoking situation, with the goal of overcoming our use of avoidance.

- Anxiety Response: Fight or Flight. We can use relaxation techniques to help us overcome or reduce our fight or flight response.

- Anxiety Response: Unrealistic Thoughts. Cognitive strategies that identify unrealistic anxious thoughts can decrease overall anxiety. The individual needs to acknowledge that the anxious thinking is extreme and not appropriate. After acknowledging the thoughts' unrealistic nature, the person can focus on adaptive thinking skills that focus on problem-solving. Positive reinforcement can help the person think through the situation and find a solution to the problem.

Conversation Starters

Think of a situation where your emotional response would be anxiety/anxiousness. What you would be avoiding? In what ways would your avoidance cause an outside observer to claim that your behavior appeared uncaring? How could you remedy the situation?

Anger and Empathy

Reflect on the story about Aneesha and her mother, and think about Aneesha's covert feelings of anger. Aneesha's anger, in some interpretations, manifested itself as lethargy and disinterest.

Individuals who are easily angered may later regret the responses they had; however, actions cannot be undone. People's angry responses—in addition to having the potential to harm their intended target—can influence perceptions of their empathy levels.

Anger has three components:

1. **Behavioral Component:** Anger can be conveyed via one's behaviors.
2. **Physiological Component:** Anger is triggered by the same hormones as anxiety.
3. **Cognitive Component.** When angry, we are more likely to see others as hostile or as a threat, and we fail to understand other people as whole and dimensional.
   a. Hostile perceptions can lead us to focus only on negative behavior, dismiss any positive behavior, blame others for any negative outcomes, and even dehumanize other people. Remembering that positive and non-hostile characteristics likely accompany every hostile trait we perceive can increase our potential for empathy.

   b. When angry, we may also feel envy as we compare what we have (tangible or intangible) to what others have. By focusing on only these differences, we decrease our capacity for empathy. We can increase our capacity for empathy by acknowledging that those who excel in some areas of life may struggle in other areas; compassionate responses ease the sting of envy and help us embrace empathetic behavior.

   c. Dehumanization demonstrates severe lack of empathy. In these situations, angry individuals are prone to violence, and entire groups of people may be on the receiving end of those violent tendencies

Manassis writes, "People who have even one friend in the vilified group usually hesitate to participate in such atrocities: their empathy overrides ideology." This highlights the importance of interactions between different groups and efforts to help break down barriers between groups. By seeing each other as complex individuals, we do not define them solely by their group status.

Conversation Starters

Think of a situation where you might have become angry at someone for something. What were the hostile attributions you had? Then, using the same situation, think about possible non-hostile attributions/thoughts that could be had for the same situation. How does this increase/change your ability to want to be empathetic towards the individual?

Perceived Scarcity, Daily Hassles, and Burnout

In addition to the emotions above, situations in daily life influence empathy.

Perceived scarcity curtails our empathy. For example, if someone tries to use a resource that we have in small amounts (e.g., time, money), we may react with lower levels of empathy. We can combat this instinctual response by "building reserves" of that resource so that we guard it less fiercely and respond more empathetically to requests for it.

Conversation Starters

What is one resource that you perceive as scarce? What can you do to "build reserves"? Students can also expand on this by discussing a time when their perceived scarcity resulted in them showing little empathy in a situation.

Daily hassles can affect our empathy and can sometimes prove more detrimental to our empathy levels than serious life events. Accomplishing daily tasks can increase our stress levels, especially as those daily tasks and their accompanying hassles increase in number. As hassles increase, so does our frustration at not pursuing the activities that interest us more. Consistent daily hassles can lead to inappropriate coping strategies, pessimism, and irritability—all of which can compromise one's capacity for empathy.

Conversation Starters

What are some examples of daily hassles you face? How do you cope with these hassles? Students can also expand on this by discussing a time when their daily hassles resulted in them showing little empathy in a situation.

Burnout is the feeling of being permanently stuck in a given situation resulting in a lack of enthusiasm. We can prevent burnout by decreasing hassles, taking time to "recharge," and rekindling relationships. Such methods allow us to focus on positive things, thus increasing capacity for empathy.
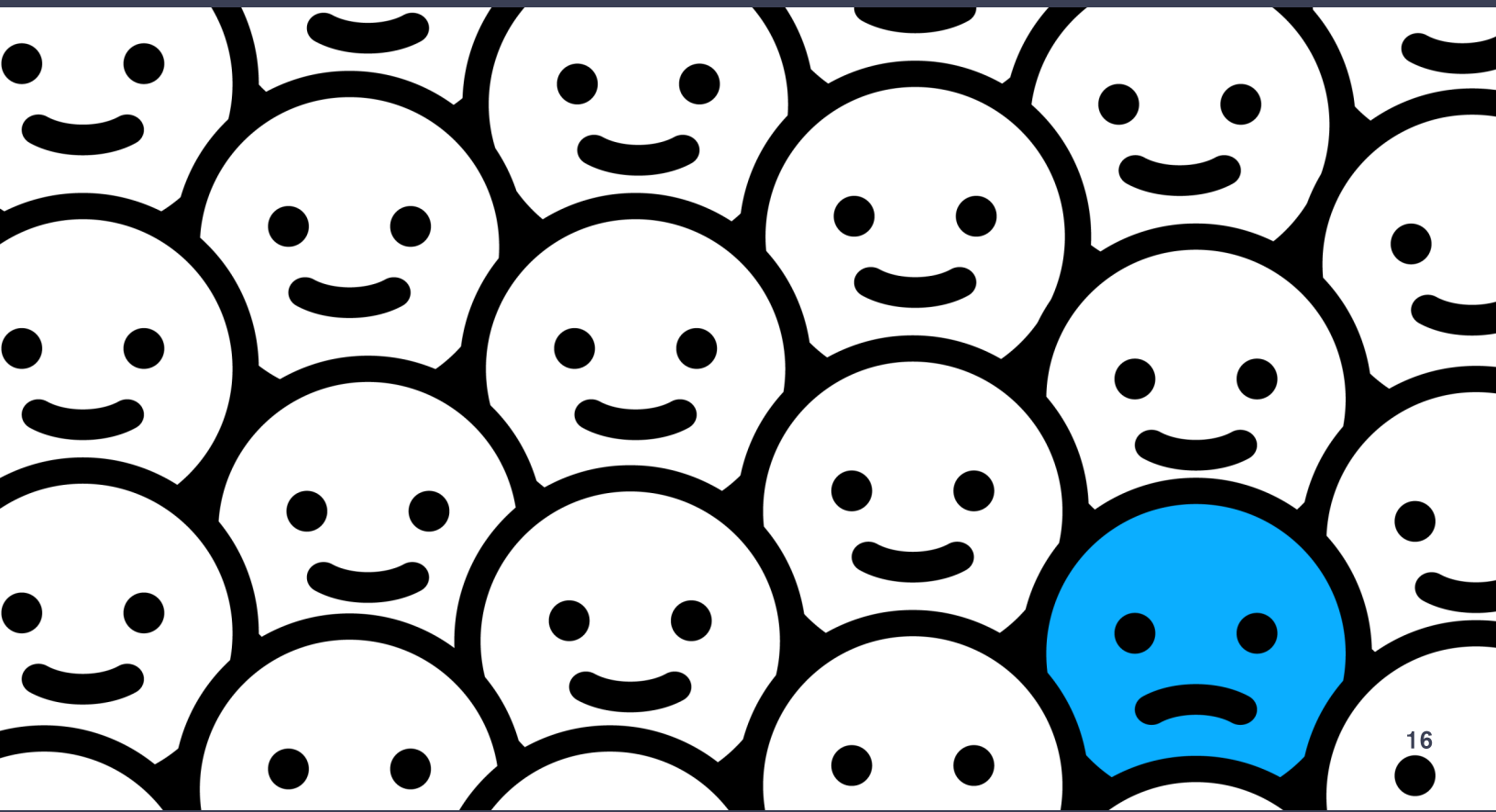
Coping Strategies

Finding ways of appropriately coping with our emotions is vital to our empathy. Coping strategies include the following:

- **Altruism**: Channeling energy from a negative emotion into an activity that benefits others can heighten our empathetic responses.
- **Sublimation:** Expressing emotions creatively can indirectly benefit others who relate to the creative work.
- **Suppression and Anticipation:** When we knowingly suppress our emotions, we acknowledge them but do not act upon them. This action allows our physiological reactions to pass, and we can then more clearly focus on how to respond. Anticipation allows us to plan for possible situations that will elicit negative emotions so that when those situations arise, we have a strategy for handling them.
- **Humor:** A sense of humor allows us to connect with others in similar situations.
- **Emotion-Focused Coping:** When we have little control over the source of our stress, we adapt by finding ways to cope emotionally (e.g., asking others for support, sharing feelings with others).
  - ▷ **Mindfulness** is a type of emotion-focused coping, as it focuses on being in the present and observing thoughts and emotions without judgment.
- **Appraisal-Focused Coping:** Changing the way one thinks about a stressful situation can decrease negativity and, in turn, increase empathic responses.
- **Problem-Focused Coping:** Finding alternative solutions to the problem and then determining the best solution can help us make empathetic choices. This strategy works best in situations where we have control over the stressor.

Coping Methods for Parents

Parents' abilities to handle intense emotions can influence their ability to show empathy towards their children. Proactive steps to handle stressors include the following:

- Provide a stable home environment that offers children constant, reliable support.
- Practicing contingent responding, which can result in the child developing a secure attachment.
- Use healthy coping strategies that correspond with your partner/co-parent.
- Limit unnecessary anger/anxiety in children.
- Protect children from traumatic experiences.
- Provide an empathy-promoting environment that is "marked by caring, stable, predictable parenting, and free from trauma and unnecessary stress or competition." (pp.103)

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Chapter 7
Relationships and Empathy: Treating the Other Person as a "Thou"

This chapter examines the social side of empathy by exploring empathy in one-on-one human relationships.

Inter-Subjectivity ("I-Thou")

Each person must value the other for their unique perspectives despite any differences. We "develop a manner of relating to others that is deeply respectful and constitutes an "I-Thou" relationship" by "honoring the person rather than exploiting them, and regarding the other's subjective experience as valid and worthy of interest" (pp. 108).

The "I-Thou" relationship has the following features:

- **Not a continuous state.** "I-Thou" inter-subjectivity is done moment by moment and is often situational (e.g., comforting a bereaved family member).
- **Can be challenging.** Our everyday lives present hassles that prompt flight or fight responses. By practicing inter-subjectivity, we can regularly apply energy to maintain healthy relationships.
- **Needs to have balance and complementarity.** Long-term relationships require a balance between freedom and connection. Manassis writes that we need to "feel free from being controlled by the other person, yet connected enough to care about their well-being" (p.109). Balance includes establishing healthy psychological boundaries. Complementarity means valuing each other's contributions to a relationship and demonstrating gratitude for one another.

Types of Relationships

Empathy toward others may be easier or more difficult to accomplish depending on the type of relationship we have with the other person.

Review **Figure 7.1**: "Relationship Types by Closeness and Emotional Value"

Low-Influence Relationships

Low-influence relationships often provide opportunities for empathetic behavior. Such relationships include interactions with acquaintances or low-stakes encounters (e.g., with grocery store clerks, baristas, people in line). These types of relationships provide us with ample opportunities to behave empathetically and connect with others.

At the same time, encounters in low-influence relationships are not always kind and do not always make it easy to act empathetically. We can benefit such low-influence relationships by finding ways of showing empathy even when not prompted to do so; such proactive strategies help to build a kinder, more empathetic society.

High-Influence Relationships

High-influence relationships have an ongoing impact on our well-being. High-impact relationships may be characterized by feelings from past interactions with our parents; we bring certain expectations of how our behaviors should be reciprocated. These expectations include the following:

- "Transference"
- "Internal working models"
- "Core conflictual relationship themes"
- "Relationship schema"

A lack of awareness of past behavior patterns, particularly patterns that stem from insecure attachments with parents, may interfere with our ability to think and act empathetically.

Childhood trauma, abuse, and skewed relationship models can trigger psychological responses that interfere with empathy. Review Mandy and Michael's story, which illustrates an example of insecure attachments in the past influencing empathy and other positive behaviors in a future romantic relationship.

Conversation Starters

Think about the low-influence and high-influence relationships in your life. Can you think of examples of empathetic interactions with both groups? Is it easier to be empathetic in your low-influence relationships or in your high-influence relationships? Provide examples.

Empathy for Our Enemies and for People Who Have Hurt Us Deeply

Encounters with enemies and with people who have hurt us challenge our empathy the most.

Review **Figure 7.1** and consider high-influence relationships with negative emotional valence. For example, we often struggle to forgive a close friend, colleague, partner who has betrayed our trust. In high-influence relationships, we allow others into our lives and often convey our vulnerabilities to them. We enter into these relationships with the expectation that the other person will not take advantage of our vulnerabilities.

Conversation Starters

The story of Courtney and Selena provides us with an example of how angry and upset we can become when we feel betrayed or manipulated by someone we trusted. In the case of Selena's reaction, we find that Selena suffered from very insecure attachments to her mother. Still, you may struggle to empathize with someone like Courtney, as her behavior seemed to blatantly hurt Selena.

Though we may not find much empathy in the situation, would it be worthwhile to try to put ourselves in Courtney's shoes? Would we have more empathy if we tried to understand troubles in Courtney's past that encouraged her to behave in that way?

Have you ever had to reconcile a past hurt? How did you get through it? Were you eventually able to forgive or act empathetically towards the person who hurt you?

Overall, an empathetic understanding of those who have hurt us deeply may be helpful in motivating us to change the social conditions that create such betrayals. Insights about those who have hurt us may help us recognize how good others are. Even thinking of others in a different capacity can alleviate the fight or flight response so that we do not immediately retaliate. Negative experiences with people should not shade our perceptions of humanity.

We all have the capacity to hurt others. By remembering instances where others have hurt us, we can curtail our impulses to hurt other people.

Chapter 8
Beliefs and Ideals that Motivate Attention to Others' Well-Being

This chapter explores empathy as it relates to broader social beliefs and ideals.

Each of us exhibits certain ideologies that often reflect our world views. We rely upon certain beliefs and ideals to help us cope with our circumstances. When we feel threatened, we prefer our close-knit relationships and may look at others as outsiders

Spirituality and Empathy: Future-Focused, Divisive, or Self-Serving Ideals

Spiritual and religious traditions often aim to enhance empathetic behavior. Despite this goal, the actual application of beliefs and traditions may emphasize individualism and diminish the value of others.

For example, how can someone exhibit strong faith with a goal of individual salvation and still show empathy for other people? (See Helen's story.) In another example, how can people understand others' different views of spirituality? (See John's story.)

Spirituality and Empathy: Present-Focused, Inclusive, or Humble Ideals

Self-transcendence often involves a sense of safety and reassurance that comes from a belief in a deity or higher being. Such faith can reduce anxiety about an uncertain future, allowing people to focus on the present. Rituals such as meditation and prayer may also provide a sense of safety, a way to alleviate stress, and a reduction in flight or fight responses.

Reverence for a natural world can help individuals to appreciate the limits of human power and understanding. Many spiritual traditions emphasize humility regarding the limits of individual knowledge. Recognizing these limits may help people to better understand the spiritual views of others.

Many faiths promote similar virtues such as The Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"), gratitude, forgiveness, and humility. By understanding that people other than ourselves may embrace these virtues, we can develop "I-Thou" relationships with the world and further our own empathetic understanding and behavior.
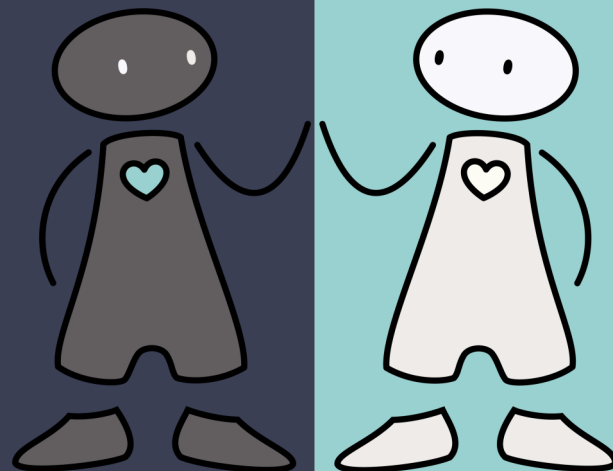
Conversation Starters

"What aspects of [your] spiritual traditions could potentially enhance empathy for others? Can you think of any ways in which spirituality might interfere with empathy for others?" (pp.140)

Social Attitudes and Empathy

One social attitude that impacts our empathetic worldview is tribalism. Tribalism comprises attitudes and behaviors that renounce individual intellectual freedom and instead emphasize strong loyalty to one's own tribe or social group. Tribalism in modern society often means exclusion of others. Strict alliance with one social group based on factors such as race, gender, age, able-bodied status, religion, or economic position can lead to prejudice and a general lack of empathy for others in the "out" group. Connecting to and conversing with "outsiders" is an important step toward understanding, perspective-taking, and empathy toward others.

Another social attitude that affects our empathy levels is individualism. Individualism bases itself on the freedom to think and act independently, often underscoring the notion that individual hard work and effort are the sole reasons for success. An extreme belief in individualism can curtail an understanding of others. Individualism embraces the belief that people who struggle in life (i.e., people burdened by poverty) are at fault for their own circumstances

Conversation Starters

Read Dana's story and reflect on disappointments that you have experienced in your own life. How did you deal with them? Were you able to set aside ideals of individualism?

Social attitudes that acknowledge our interdependence are conducive to empathy. If we strive to understand the importance that each of us has in the world, at scales both large and small, we can treat each other with more patience and kindness.

Conversation Starters

"Which of your social attitudes enhance empathy for others? Which of your social attitudes interfere with empathy for others?" (pp. 140)

Chapter 9
Implications for Therapists

This chapter focuses on the relationship between empathy and therapy and how the therapist can utilize empathy in setting goals and advocating for patients.

Assessment

Within North America, mental health assessment often focuses on individuals adaptive functioning and incident of distress; this approach is consistent with the individualistic culture evident in this region. In addition, this approach often fails to acknowledge others with whom a patient interacts. By solely focusing on the individual, we fail to acknowledge how the individual's behaviors may or may not be empathetic and how those behaviors may reduce empathy from others.

Therapists can explicitly ask their patients about others with whom they have relationships and how their own mental illness may be effecting those relationships. This approach may help the patient in empathy development. Furthermore, by acknowledging other relationships, the patient may feel as though the therapist is aware that their patient is a multi-faceted individual beyond that of just their symptoms. Finally, therapists can infuse empathy into assessment by addressing tough or traumatic events gently and attempting to provide a constructive conclusion to the assessment.

The Goals of Therapy

Jason's story provides a concrete example of how Manassis demonstrated empathy with a young client. Manassis shares the importance of not relying solely on parental reports, limits to confidentiality, and engaging in an empathetic perspective during therapy. As noted above with assessment, when psychotherapy includes empathy, the focus becomes both on the individual as well as the well-being of others with whom the patient interacts.(Manassis connects the ideas of empathy and therapeutic goals with information presented in Chapters five and eight.)

The Process of Therapy and the Therapeutic Relationship

Therapists can be empathy role models through their therapeutic interactions and how they conduct the business aspect of the practice. Sometimes, therapists may face especially challenging circumstances, for example when patients are rude or miss appointments, which can strain their empathy with patients. For these reasons, it is important that therapists instill consequences for behaviors that, hopefully, will reduce the challenging circumstances, while helping to ensure that the therapist can be empathetic and support the patient to the full extent.

It is important for therapists to remember that, "a key element of most psychotherapies is to connect with the mentally healthy parts of the patient empathetically in order to overcome the unhealthy parts, without letting one's own emotional issues interfere with that process. When this happens, patients feel both validated and strengthened, often facilitating change." (pp.151).This can sometimes be difficult, however therapists are more able to empathize and provide effective therapy when they are able to take the perspective of their patient.

Should a therapist struggle with empathizing with a patient, Manassis provides three suggestions.
1. Ensure that the patient has the mental capacity available to benefit from psychotherapy.
2. Reevaluate the current therapeutic approach.
3. Examine possible issues within one's self that may be reducing one's capacity for empathy with the patient (see page 152 for examples).

The Content of Therapy

The content of therapy can often help patients increase their capacity for empathy, including coping skills, understanding other's perspectives, and increasing emotional connections. Patients' empathy development is maximized when the therapeutic approach includes a focus on developing and nurturing empathetic relationships with others and incorporating spiritual beliefs if the patient desires/requires.

Advocacy and Mental Health Care Systems

Manassis succinctly summarizes some of the difficulties therapists face stating "Overall, an empathetic therapist is often caught between competing demands to respond to the needs of individual patients, to the need to improve systems of care for all, and to the needs of his or her own family. Juggling these demands effectively requires a mindful attitude that responds to each person and each presenting concern with calm, empathetic wisdom, moment by moment." (pp. 158).

Chapter 10
Implications for Parents

This chapter provides reasons for parents to embrace empathy and why it is important to model it for children.

Benefits of Empathetic Children

Individual Well-Being
- Secure parent-child relationships develop
- Better adjustment at school
- Reduced aggression
- Fewer mood and anxiety problems
- Resilience in peer relationships due to development of social/emotional knowledge
- Increased ability to solve problems non-violently
- Increase in self-esteem that comes from altruistic behavior

Child Connections
- Cooperation among children
- Interest in social justice issues
- Reduced prejudice toward people who are different from themselves
- Understanding of self and others in a globalized world

Conversation Starters

Review "The Child You Weren't Expecting" on pages 171-174. What unique challenges might parents raising children with special needs experience?

Review and discuss "Questions for Parents" on pages 175–176. *Note*: If you are not a parent yourself, think about the questions from your parents' perspectives.

Teaching Empathy

Remember that we can learn empathy. Practice strengthens our empathetic capacities and abilities.

By teaching others how to behave empathetically, we strengthen the perspective-taking component of our own empathy.

Modeling Empathy

Though we may wish the opposite was true, children emulate behavior rather than instructions. Because of this tendency, parents and other adults must understand the importance of modeling appropriate empathetic behaviors. Children need examples to follow when faced with new situations. **Modeling empathy means:**

- Respecting people of all backgrounds and abilities;
- Being open-minded; and
- Welcoming new people.

Encouraging Empathy

Each day offers numerous opportunities to practice empathetic behavior with children and hone their empathetic instincts. To encourage empathetic responses in children, parents can follow this guidance:

- Discuss the motivations of characters in books and movies to help children develop an interest in others' points of view.
- Use pretend scenarios to help children understand what others might be thinking or feeling. Ask the child how someone might feel if excluded from a group or after s/he won a prize.
- When playing games or completing group tasks, encourage teamwork and solutions to conflict that will benefit everyone involved.
- Talk about different emotions. Help children understand that life has ups and downs. Show how we can cope safely and calmly when negative events happen.
- Discuss the movies, shows, games, books, and other media with which children interact. Media exposure can contradict empathetic behaviors.
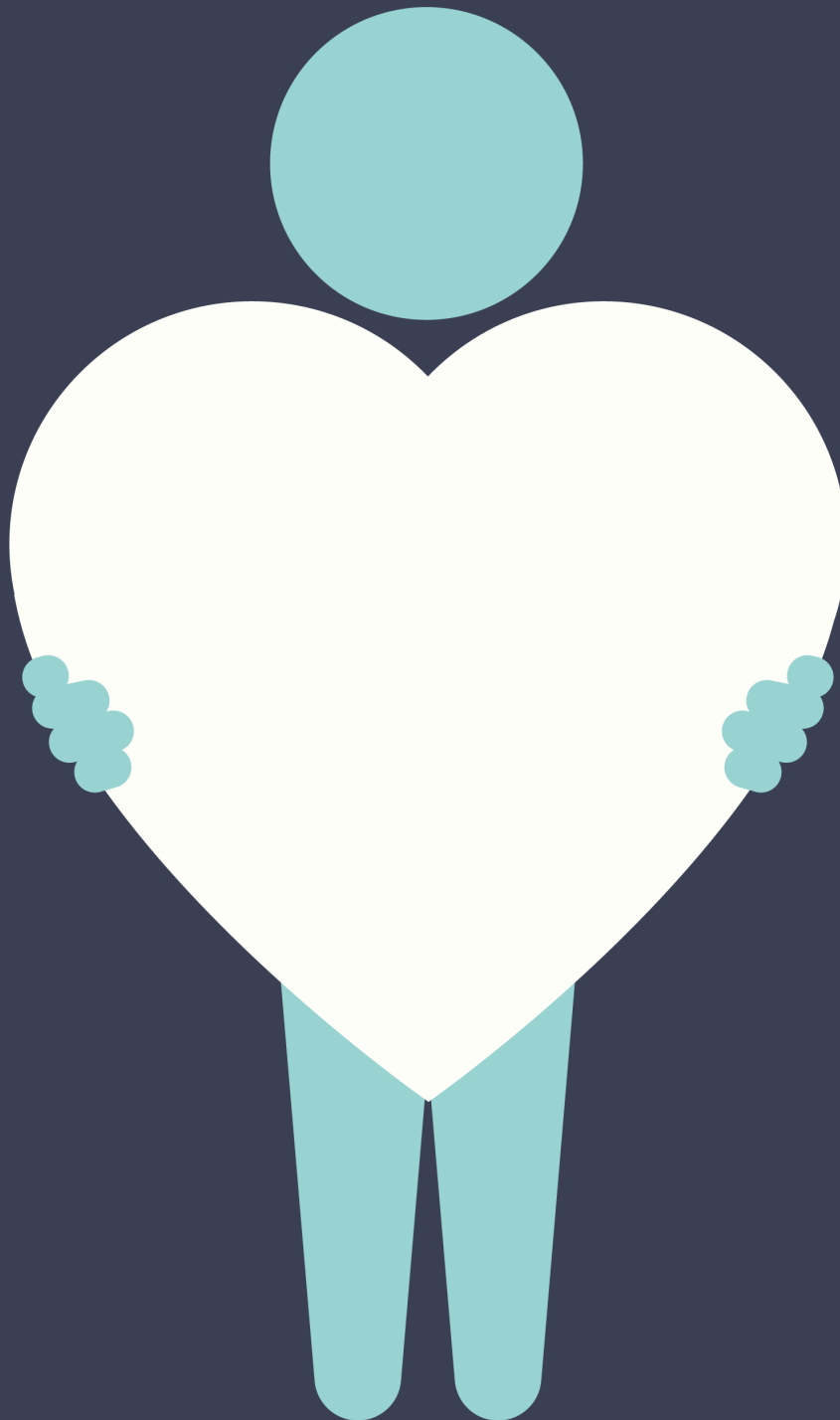
Chapter 11
Implications for Leaders and Organizations

This chapter focuses on the challenges to empathy in both large and small organizations, but also the importance for organizations and its leaders to support the capacity for and create a culture of empathy.

Organizational leaders can set an empathetic tone for members of the organization to follow. To be an effective empathetic leader, leaders must model the following mindsets:

- **Value of the Individual:** Each member of the organization brings unique value and should be recognized for his/her talent and skills.
- **Group Cohesion Through Interactions:** Mutual respect and support characterize group interactions. Collective achievement, rather than individual achievement, is encouraged and celebrated. Team-building exercises happen. Group members practice mutual respect and tolerance for diversity of opinion.
- **Role of the Leader:** Leaders must model empathy. Empathetic leaders value people more than procedures. Leaders must take care when gauging their level of involvement in a task. Leaders may try to practice perspective taking by working as one of their employees.
- **Collective Problem Solving:** Organizations can include members in solving problems; inclusion benefits the collective and can enhance members' well-being.
- **Group Philosophies:** Organization should support within-group empathy as well as empathy for people outside of the organization. Organization should embrace contributions from all people and celebrate diversity of opinions and traditions.

Conversation Starters

Think about your school experiences. Can you remember a teacher who encouraged you in your unique, special talent? Did s/he do this for other children as well? Did you feel that you were in a classroom where you valued the contributions of others? Did you have an opposite experience?

Empathy for All Life

Unfortunately, the same barriers that hinder our empathy for other humans can also hinder our empathy for plants, animals, and the environment. Manassis notes that potential biases such as the kinship bias, attractiveness bias, empathy that favors perceived victims, and empathy that favors individuals rather than groups can impact our behavior toward non-humans. We find it easier to find empathy for things we like, things that are cute, and things that can be enjoyed, rather than potentially destructive forces.

But, nature just *is*. It is up to humans to accept and respect all aspects of nature.

Global Problems and Empathetic Leadership

How can empathetic leadership connect us globally? Just as empathetic actions in our day-to-day lives can have ripple effects, so can actions on a global scale. Problems connect, as do communities, organizations, and leaders. Leaders taking actions to address those problems can influence individuals, organizations, and countries—potentially leading to a more empathetic world.

Sharing resources equitably, valuing the earth, and ensuring people's health and prosperity can contribute to peace and a sustainable environment for everyone.

Chapter 12
Implications for Everyone

This chapter discusses key ideas on why and how empathy development benefits all areas of life. In addition, the chapter covers methods for practicing empathy and acknowledging its potential for making the world a better place.

"Virtuous Cycle" of Empathy

Think about the barista story that Manassis described in the book's preface—remember that the author's impatience nevertheless resulted in an empathetic reaction from the barista. That simple act of empathy had a profound ripple effect on other customers and on the author's actions for the remainder of the day.

This "virtuous cycle" of empathy includes a greater capacity for altruistic behavior. When others treat us well and when we feel good, we feel compelled to continue behaving altruistically and empathically toward others. Though Manassis was the person who benefited directly from the barista's empathetic behavior, the people around her benefited as well. The line moved quickly, which improved the patience and moods in the other customers, especially those with children. A positive mood can contribute to a greater capacity for empathy, as it calms the fight or flight response.

Manassis explores this scenario through the lenses of social influences discussed in Chapter 3 (family/group, community/organization, country/culture) and relationships discussed in Chapter 7 (low influence and high influence). For example, she talks about how the people in line may inspire others to be more understanding and work cooperatively. Parents experiencing a boost in their patience levels after observing the act of empathy model that behavior with their children. By planting the seeds of empathy with children, we encourage respectful and caring relationship models to help future generations. Manassis also explores larger worldwide implications of the coffee shop's commitment to empathy.

This example illustrates that good deeds, altruism, positivity, and empathy can establish a world where people care for one another and act accordingly. At the same time, Manassis points out that people need to trust that their actions make a difference even if the impact is not immediately obvious.

An Attitude of Interdependence

How can we develop empathy more consistently? Our first step is to recognize our interdependence.

If we can see ourselves as reliant on others (including plants, animals, and the atmosphere) and as individual contributors to the greater good, we can increase our capacity for empathy.

Conversation Starters

Review "Key Points for Developing Empathy" on pages 196–198. Do these key points seem within your reach? Are some more difficult to practice than others? Which ones do you feel come more naturally to you?

Adjusting Negative Attitudes

Actions that can reduce negativity include the following:

- Make peace with the past through any means necessary
- Avoid instinctual reactions to stress (the fight or flight response)
- Nurture health practices that strengthen your mind and body

These actions can free you from complete self-interest and allow you to focus on others.

Actions that can improve your mental attitude include the following:

- Nurture your own capacity for empathy—address the biopsychosocial factors that help or hinder empathetic behavior and think about the "ripple effect" that your positive actions can have on the people around you.

- Work on policies that reflect empathy for all life—both appreciate and acknowledge the contributions you can make to help others.

Reasons to Be Optimistic

- **We are designed for empathy.** Humans survived because of their focus on the well-being of the group. Adding to that, we have mirror neurons and different brain areas dedicated to perspective-taking, along with oxytocin to support emotional aspects of empathy. We have the biological capacity for empathy, and our social environment can foster it.

- **Empathy is under-reported.** The media seems to always report bad news, yet people are engaged with empathy and altruism every day. Many professions are dedicated to helping others, and a significant number of people volunteer their time to help others. We also engage in everyday acts of kindness that can influence someone's life, even if they go unnoticed at the time.

- **We can focus on empathy when life is difficult.** See page 202 for possible solutions.

- We can return to empathy despite adversity. Experiencing difficulties, adversities, or traumas can take a toll on our empathy. Forgiving ourselves for behaviors that may have hurt others is necessary to move on. Even if it is difficult to have empathy toward others, one can imagine what an empathetic person would say or do.

- **Empathy sustains us.** Our caring and hopeful actions can create lasting impressions in our lives and in the lives of others.

Conversation Starters

Review and discuss the reflective questions on page 205.

Textbook Reading Guide