

Empathy is "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another", but we usually think of it as sharing in another's suffering. Let's get clear on five outdated ideas.

**Old: "Only sensitive people are empathetic."**

We got away with this unspoken bias in our thinking until Dr. Rizzolatti discovered mirror neurons, unique neurons in the brains of *every human* that are activated whenever we observe the behavior of another person. Since his original discovery, continued research has shown, "Whenever we see what happens to others, we not only *understand* what they experience but also often empathically *share* their (emotional) states."

**New: *We're all wired for empathy.***

**Old: "Empathy is only helpful to the one receiving it."**

We have a tendency to imagine empathy moving only in one direction, benefitting only the one receiving it. Pay attention next time you're in a movie theatre watching the new *Rocky* movie. (Of course there's going to be another one!) The neurons that make it possible for us to connect with his experience are the same neurons that make us feel as though we're a champion right along with him. That's us empathizing and we're cheering.

**New: *Empathizing with another can enlarge a positive experience.***

**Old: "Empathy is only necessary when someone is suffering."**

Expanding on the previous idea, we have a tendency to imagine that empathy is useful only in situations where a shared experience will support someone in distress. *Although this is a very important ability to nurture*, we can actually empathize with another, share in their experience, *no matter what their emotional state*. That's what's happening when I pump my fist right along with Serena Williams after she serves an ace.

**New: *Empathy eases our pain, shame and fear and expands our joy.***

**Old: "To empathize is to succumb to someone else's pain."**

This misconception may have been the natural by-product of "support groups". In the absence of a purpose other than "support" we got together and bonded over each other's misery. Empathy doesn't demand that we leave our own state of peace to be with another in their state of distress. In fact, extending compassion while *also* empathizing with others actually *offsets* any negative experience we might have while acknowledging suffering.

**New: *I can extend my own awareness of well-being while sharing in another's pain.***

**Old: "One's ability to empathize is fixed."**

The same body of research that uncovered our natural ability to empathize also discovered we'll empathize to greater or lesser degrees depending on different factors. No one is unconditionally empathetic. The good news is they've also found that the conscious extension of compassion toward someone we empathize with activates the same area of the brain associated with bonding and rewards. Compassion feels good, and it can be learned.

**New: "*If we're connected was decided for us. How we're connected is decided by us.*"**

Through mindfulness, we develop the ability to experience powerful emotions without identifying with them. Identification with well-being and compassion allows us to be empathetic with others without fear of being overwhelmed by their pain.