

The Challenge of Empathy

"We need to instigate a cultural shift from 'buying' to 'belonging'—from extrinsic to intrinsic values—where our personal identity and wellbeing is based much more on the quality of our relationships and sense of community engagement than on the size of our bank balance or the heady offerings of a luxury consumer lifestyle, and where more of us are willing to put common interests before self-interest. And if we want this to happen, we must create a revolution of empathy in everyday life, since empathy underpins intrinsic values based on relationships—it is the ultimate social glue that bonds us to others."

~Roman Krznaric



With shifting policies and the legalization of cannabis, practicing empathy is essential as it helps us connect and understand each other better. But in our times, we tend to focus more on the conflicts that divide us than on the relationships that bind us. Practicing empathy can shift our thinking from a "self-interest frame" to a "common-interest frame"—from "me" to "we."

When we first encounter another, the other is an object of our inquiry. We may discover similarity. We will discover difference. This difference may be perceived as a threat, particularly when we

realize this other is also a subject perceiving (judging) us. Empathy is more likely to emerge when we allow genuine curiosity to take us beyond fear and consider the possibilities embodied in difference. Just as the courage to engage in self-reflection may lead to new discoveries about ourselves, so empathy – the attempt to imagine and step into someone else's shoes, to try to think their thoughts and feel their feelings – may bring a greater awareness of and respect for the difference.



Empathy at Work

On first encounter . . .

“How does it feel to be a parent who disapproves of cannabis but whose child seems to be benefiting from cannabis use?”

Later consideration when empathy opens up further self-reflection . . .

“If my child was experiencing severe anxiety, would I still deny that cannabis might bring some relief?”

The connection between empathy and dialogue seems obvious. But the relationship is far from simple. Dialogue can help us explore and understand different perspectives. Yet a degree of empathy would seem to be essential to any genuine dialogue. Empathy helps us:

- Acknowledge alternative ways of thinking and being in the world
- Listen more attentively and understand the perspectives of others
- Broaden our horizons allowing us to function better together

Nurturing empathy starts with recognizing the limitations of our own self-awareness as well as our limited understanding of others. An honest commitment to the pursuit of understanding and a willingness to experience

the discomfort of having our assumptions challenged makes empathy possible. While empathy cannot be willed into existence, it grows from a stance of openness to the other. It is within the nexus of similarity and difference that our experiences can interlace and can inspire us to empathize.

Ultimately, empathy is at the core of human relationships. Both empathy and dialogue seek to build greater understanding among individuals and groups in the complex world of similarities and differences so that we can function better together.

Through empathy, we are:

- at an experiential advantage, seeing the world through multiple perspectives
- more attuned to common interests
- better equipped to collaborate with each other

© 2018 – Permission to copy for non-commercial purposes.