

THE ART  
of  
EMPATHY

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO LIFE'S MOST ESSENTIAL SKILL

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PART ONE

Welcoming Empathy  
into Your Life

# What Is Empathy, and Why Is It Important?

THIS BOOK ABOUT empathy is being written in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when intensive research on empathy is occurring in more than half a dozen academic disciplines. Empathy is *hot*; it's a major topic, and it's currently the focus of extensive review, research, and debate. Researchers all over the world are focusing tremendous attention on defining empathy, and many competing views of the components of empathy are being argued about in academic journals and conferences (we'll explore many of these views in this book). Empathy is a major topic of multidisciplinary and international interest right now.

Empathy is also a major topic of interest in your personal and professional life, where it helps you understand others well enough to successfully communicate and work with them. Empathy is also an essential part of love (though you don't have to love others to empathize with them skillfully—you don't even have to know them). Empathy helps you connect with others, feel alongside them, understand them, work with them, meet their needs, love them, and be loved by them. Empathy is essential for the health of your relationships, and empathy is fundamental to your social and emotional skills.

Empathy—or rather the *lack* of empathy—is also a central feature of modern American politics, where our profoundly polarized political parties are perfect examples of how too much identification with “our side” and a corresponding lack of empathy for the “other side” (and even the willingness to create another side) lead directly to unworkable, conflict-based posturing that has essentially paralyzed our entire political process. As we

can clearly see by its absence, empathy is crucial to the functioning of all social structures—large, small, intimate, local, national, and international. So what, exactly, is empathy?

## DEFINING EMPATHY

If you and I sat together in a café, comfortable and congenial, we could probably come up with a fairly clear definition of *empathy*. We would likely agree that empathy is a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and comprehend the emotions, wishes, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others. We would also want to include a capacity to help others in our definition, because empathy tends to involve some form of action that allows us to interact with and offer support, assistance, or a listening ear to people we empathize with. In our definition, we'd probably conclude that empathy makes us aware of and available to the emotions, circumstances, and needs of others so that we can interact with them skillfully.

We would also probably agree that we'd prefer to be with an empathic person who could understand, connect to, interact with, and support us skillfully, as opposed to an unempathic person who did not know how to get into sync with us. In our relaxed café discussion, we might take fewer than five minutes to define empathy in a way that made sense to both of us, and yet we'd be jumping the gun. As I mentioned, researchers and theorists are engaged in an extensive rethinking of the definition and the function of empathy, and it is currently the topic of intense review and debate.

We'll visit these debates in Chapter 2, and we'll deepen our definition of empathy throughout this book. However, as we commence with our study of empathy, let's define it this way:

*Empathy* is a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support.

In a way, we could call empathy the social and emotional glue that helps us create and maintain our relationships. It's a skill and a trait that we all possess in varying degrees—and it's a trait that's shared by many of our animal friends. It's also a skill and a trait that's very strong in certain people—while some of us struggle to empathize with clarity, others are exceptionally

sensitive to the emotions, circumstances, and needs of everyone and everything around them. I identify these latter people as *empaths*.

## IDENTIFYING EMPATHS

What is an empath? Well, you are (in your own way) an empath. I am as well, and as the proto-empath (I was the first person to have claimed the title professionally in the late 1970s, and I started writing books about being an empath back in 1997), I've spent my life learning to work with, understand, define, redefine, and study emotions, empathy, and empaths. So, my current definition is this:

An *empath* is someone who is aware that he or she reads emotions, nuances, subtexts, undercurrents, intentions, thoughts, social space, interactions, relational behaviors, body language, and gestural language to a greater degree than is deemed normal.

We're all empathic;<sup>1</sup> we have to be in order to navigate our way through the social world. We all read emotions, intentions, nuances, and so on, because empathy (as I am defining it—we'll explore more in the next chapter) is central to our capacity to connect to, interact with, and understand others and the social world.

The difference between being empathic and being an empath is one of intent and awareness. For me, emotions, nuances, subtexts, and so forth are the things I notice first in any situation. Words are interesting, but in many cases they tend to hide and obscure the more honest parts of communication and social interaction. For me, there's a wonderfully surprising world that exists in the space between words, and it's the space where my attention is nearly always drawn. Let me show you what I mean so you can understand this in a more tangible way. I'm going to invite you to sit inside my head as I people watch in a regular, everyday situation where I can't hear what's being said. (Is this the world's first *empath-cam*? Yes!) I chose this scene carefully, because it invites you into a level of empathy that's intentional, simple, and fun. (I masked the identities of everyone but my husband, Tino, and myself.)

Empathy wasn't always simple or fun for me. When I was young, my intense empathic and emotional receptivity made me feel as if I were on fire with the emotions of others. I picked up so many emotions and so much nonverbal social information from everyone around me that I often didn't

know who I was or what I felt. The unprotected empathic receptivity I experienced in childhood was overwhelming for me. Too much information came barreling in at me, and I couldn't organize it, separate from it, manage it, or understand it. Part of my intense interpersonal receptivity, or *hyperempathy*, was a response to abuse that had occurred in my early childhood (I'll gently touch on that story in Chapter 2). But another part of my struggle came directly from our everyday training about emotions.

Most of us learn in very early childhood to distrust emotions, to categorize them as positive or negative, and to be suspicious about—and frankly afraid of—most of them.<sup>2</sup> I learned through cultural training that receiving emotions from others (unless those emotions were based on happiness) was something to guard against, because emotions were constantly portrayed as unwelcome, irrational, and even dangerous. This training didn't help me in any way, and as I grew up and learned how to live as a hyperempath, I had to actually veer away from almost all of our cultural training about emotions so that I could understand them empathically and work with them intelligently. Now, thankfully, after a lifetime of learning how to recognize, comprehend, and work with emotions empathically and how to understand and manage my hyperempathy, both have become useful tools that I can demonstrate without overwhelming you.

In the following scene, I'll walk you through a safe and grounded situation in which my strong empathy and emotional sensitivity are now helpful traits and not horrendous problems. I'll slow everything down so that you can identify, think about, catalog, reflect on, and predict some possible actions, emotions, and responses—but I'll rein myself in so that this people-watching scene won't exhaust you with too many details.

Note that I'll refer to emotions in a way that may seem unusual to you, but don't worry. We'll learn about my empathic approach to emotions in Chapters 3 and 4. For now, just come along with me:

It's almost closing time at the gym. I'm sitting relaxed and alone in the lobby after my swim, waiting for my husband, Tino, to come out of the locker room. The pool behind the large plate-glass window next to me is empty, and the normally noisy building is quiet and settling down after a long day.

Joseph, the maintenance man, enters the lobby and walks to the front desk, pushing a large cart filled with towels and cleaning



supplies. He holds himself tall and proud—never subservient or slightly apologetic, but straightforward and dignified, with a good connection to his healthy anger and contentment. He nods and smiles at me, happily, and then turns and stops at the front desk on his way down the hallway. I can't quite make out what he's saying to Iris, the front desk attendant, as she works to close up shop, but I can see his back and his gestures, as well as her face as she interacts with him.

Joseph is talking about their shared work, and he's using analogies from the Bible to engage with Iris. I know this not just because I've heard Joseph bless me and other people, but also because he's using the rhythms and cadences of the Southern Baptist church. I don't know if Iris is a religious woman, and I'm concerned and apprehensive that he might offend her, so I watch her respond to Joseph as he sways slightly and gestures in a gracefully theatrical way.

Iris doesn't break his gaze to look at me with any sort of apology or irritation, so I gather that she's not offended or embarrassed. However, she holds her body a bit rigid, not matching Joseph's swaying rhythm. She displays a hint of anger and smiles at him, but it's not a big smile, if you know what I mean. She's engaging with him, yet she's keeping her distance, cool and somewhat businesslike, as she works to close down her desk for the night. Uh-oh! I feel my faint apprehension return. I'm not sure yet if her subtle anger is a function of their possibly unequal statuses within the workplace, their racial and cultural differences (Joseph is black; Iris is white), or perhaps some interpersonal problem between them.

Joseph displays a momentary bit of wariness—a soft form of fear that he follows quickly with a light display of happiness. Then he shifts his body and his story, turning slightly away from Iris and almost addressing an invisible audience. Oh, nice! I feel calmer, and I feel respect for Joseph's social skills. Joseph has oriented to her anger signal, and he has corrected his approach by applying a split second of appropriate shame to his behavior. Iris now has the space she needs to focus on her work. Joseph still wants to tell his inspirational story, but he has picked up her signaling and responded to it with empathic skill; he's created a win-win situation. I know this because happiness arises in Iris as she smiles a bit wider, and though she breaks his gaze to attend to her closing duties, she begins swaying with

Joseph—slightly, almost imperceptibly, but it’s there. She’s dropped a boundary, and she’s engaging with him willingly. This tells me that they’re not having an ongoing interpersonal problem (because he was so quickly able to repair the situation, and she was so willing to let the repair happen) and that their workplace status appears to be fairly equal (because he understood her need to get back to work and didn’t monopolize her time as a superior might have). However, I’m still interested in the cultural and racial divide between them.

As the conversation between Joseph and Iris continues, Iris sweeps her gaze toward me with some wariness—soft fear and a bit of appropriate shame (because she’s not working “properly” in front of a gym member). I look down quickly and pretend not to be watching them. This is the end of a long day for them, and they need a sense of their own private time. Even though I’m just a few yards away, I intentionally ignore Iris to create a kind of privacy wall between us. Iris turns back toward Joseph, and her soft fear and shame subside, because she’s satisfied that I’m not a problem she needs to attend to.

Joseph reaches a natural pause in his story, and Iris leans toward him happily and adds her own piece about some biblical character. Okay, so she’s religious, and she’s not offended by his biblical references. But as she speaks, I see Joseph’s back tense up slightly—with small amounts of anger and shock—and he shifts his body sideways, away from her, tilting his head as if he’s listening to something that he is not quite sure of. *Ouch!* I wonder if Iris has made a faux pas; perhaps she’s mentioned the wrong part of the Bible or the wrong character. Joseph knows his Bible, it’s clear, and I wait with some apprehension to see how he’ll respond.

Will Joseph correct Iris in a paternal, shaming way (and shut her down)? Will he argue with her (and create conflict between them)? Or will he shun and disengage from her (and hurt her feelings)? *Yow!* This could go sideways very quickly! I scan the room: Will I need to create a pretense to get up and move into their relational space—maybe to get a drink of water—if one or both of them gets stuck and needs some social support or a way to disengage?

At the end of her comment, Iris waits (so do I!). Although she may not be able to consciously identify the signals Joseph’s body language is sending, she’s aware that something is off and that she’s done

something wrong. She looks down and flushes with shame almost imperceptibly, and then she covers her embarrassment by leaning toward Joseph wordlessly, smiling in a broad but faintly apologetic way, and slightly lowering her entire body below his in a shame-submissive, sadness- and fear-moderated shrugging gesture.

I realize that I'm holding my breath, concerned and apprehensive. But Iris's adroit gestures of contrition shift everything. Joseph immediately leans in toward her, moving his head downward and joining her in the submissive space she has created, and with his head, he makes a kind of scooping upward gesture as he engages, "Yes!" and weaves her story into his own. Iris rises with him out of the submissive space—almost as if Joseph were pulling her upward with the movement of his head—and they are equals again, happy together, swaying together as the story continues. *Whew!* Nice social repair, Joseph and Iris! My apprehension subsides, and I begin to breathe again as I look away, relaxed and a bit dreamy.

Tino walks into the lobby from the locker room and sees Joseph and Iris talking. Although he feels appropriate shame as he looks down and attempts to walk gently past them to give them their privacy, Joseph stops his story and greets Tino jovially. Iris also stops what she's doing, and Tino slows down to address each of them with a happy smile and open, though faintly apologetic, gestures. As Tino passes them, Joseph and Iris look at each other and nod silently in unison to end their interaction and get back to work. Tino approaches me with a smile of happiness and relief, sees my absorption and curiosity, and asks, "Whatcha doin'?"

"Oh, nothin'."

Nothing indeed. The interaction I watched between Joseph and Iris took fewer than two minutes. However, as I mentioned earlier, I had to rein myself in as I wrote about it for you, because it was filled with enough social, emotional, interactional, cultural, gestural, and subtextual information to fill this book. There's a fascinating, deep, endlessly surprising richness that exists in the interactional space between people—and though we all swim in, live with, trip over, and depend utterly upon this space for our social existence, our knowledge of it exists in a hidden and unspoken area that only specialists seem to be able to access consciously.

Actors, musicians, dancers, choreographers, composers, animal trainers, performance artists, and martial artists are some of the specialists who have knowledge of this interactional space. So do novelists, poets, creative writers, and playwrights. Social scientists and behaviorists study this space intensively, and psychologists and counselors work to help us understand and become skillful in regard to it. This book adds another category to this list of interaction specialists: *empaths*.

You're already an empathic person, because your awareness of emotions, nuance, gestural language, and interaction is a function of being a member of our highly social species. *The Art of Empathy* will not magically turn you into an empath—you were born with these skills, and you use them every day. What this book will do is help you become a healthy, effective, and *intentional* empath so that you can understand emotions, use your empathy comfortably, and pilot successfully through the richness of interactional space.

You already use your nonverbal empathic skills every day—when you socialize, read body language, work with animals and infants, listen to music, laugh at physical comedy, and appreciate art and drama. You also use your verbal empathic skills when you speak and when you decipher spoken and written language, because you actually cannot make sense of verbal or written communication if you can't decipher subtext, context, nonverbal cues, and the multiple meanings behind words. Empathic skills make you verbally and nonverbally sensitive to and aware of yourself, others, and the social world.

If you're highly empathic, you might appear to be magically and supernaturally aware of others. For many years, I mistakenly thought that my intense hyperempathic abilities meant that I was a psychic (I realized my mistake and ended my entire psychic healing career in 2003). If you can read and decipher emotions, intentions, nuances, social space, and nonverbal language, you can see deeply into people's lives. You can see the issues people think they're hiding, you can quickly understand how people approach life and relationships, and you can become very skilled at getting down to the essence of who people are.

A quick example: I was an intensely active and fidgety child, and I had trouble with language (a stutter and other verbal-processing issues). I had wildly sensitive hearing and vision, recurrent nightmares, and great difficulties regulating my emotions. When I was four, my mother took me to a neurologist to see if he could help me. When he first met us, this doctor came into the consulting room in his nice white lab coat and smiled warmly as he sat down. I studied him for a few seconds and said, "Why are you so grouchy?"

“Hmmm,” he said, meeting my eyes willingly. “Do I look grouchy to you?” “No,” I replied. “You don’t *look* grouchy; you *are* grouchy.”

He laughed and sent me to play in the waiting room while he talked to my mom. Mom told me that he sort of patted her on the head in commiseration and explained that I had no filters, that I was unusually sensitive to every possible form of input—visual, auditory, tactile (he knew this from preliminary testing by my pediatrician), and emotional—and that she was going to have to protect me from the world until I learned how to manage all of my intense sensitivities. He made this diagnosis in a few seconds, empathic man that he was, because I had read through his smile and his calm demeanor and picked up on the emotional residues of a fight that he had had with his wife on the phone earlier that morning. I marvel at how lucky I was to be seen by this doctor. Another doctor might have been offended by such an impertinent child; another doctor might have lied or not even remembered the fight. But this doctor validated my strong empathic capacity and set my mom and me onto a path of trying to create a healthy, nurturing environment for an intensely sensitive person. (This book is filled with information on how you can create a similar healthy environment for yourself and your loved ones.)

With strong empathic skills, you can get to know people very deeply in a seemingly magical period of time, and it can seem as if you have access to some sort of paranormal skill. But empathic skills aren’t magical; they’re normal human abilities—even when they’re very highly developed.

After a sea change in my understanding of what it means to be an empath, as well as a return to college to study the social sciences, I now know that empathic abilities are not in any way paranormal. I apologize for having been so confused about that, because framing empathy as a mystical skill made it into something special and unobtainable—and that isn’t something I ever felt comfortable about. Empathic awareness that is highly developed can look mystical, but it’s not. Although the world that empathy reveals *is* a hidden world of undercurrent, subtext, and nonverbal cues, it is not a mystical world; rather, it is the social interactional world—and it is a world that we can all learn to understand more clearly.

A vital part of that understanding comes from learning how to work with (not against) emotions. Of all the things we pick up from others empathically, emotions can be the most problematic. When we lose our empathy for others, it’s not usually because we don’t agree with their subtext, their nuance, or