



# The Genius of EMPATHY

**PRACTICAL SKILLS  
to Heal Your Sensitive Self,  
Your Relationships  
& the World**

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Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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# Starting the Journey

AS A physician, I'm obsessed with healing.

I've devoted the past thirty years to integrating my conventional medical training—which includes a medical degree from the University of Southern California (USC) and a residency in psychiatry at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)—with my sensitivities as an empath to help my patients heal. In every setting I've worked in, including my private practice, hospitals, nursing homes, and substance abuse programs, I am humbled by the miracle of our bodies' and spirits' capacity to rise like a blazing phoenix above seemingly impossible challenges such as illness, trauma, and loss to begin to heal. What moves me and fuels my passion is identifying techniques that are effective in actionable, real-life terms.

If you're ready for a change that will accelerate your healing process in all areas of your life, empathy is an everyday superpower that is within reach—at work, with family and friends, and in all situations. An empathic life is not about being “saintly” or losing your edge or common sense. Empathy is a practical daily skill that can be learned, not simply an idealistic goal that “sounds good.” Its genius is attainable for everyone.

Time and again, I've witnessed empathy's ability to help heal me and my patients. Showing empathy for yourself or receiving it from others can make going through a health or emotional

challenge easier. It takes the bite off pain and any conflict as it soothes anxiety, brings mercy to depression, and lets you know you're not alone. You can also get a contact high from other people's joy since empathy helps you live a generous Buddhist sentiment: "My happiness is your happiness. There is no greater happiness in the world." More and more you'll be able to experience this generosity of spirit.

Empathy itself is a healing act, whether you're on the giving or receiving end. It's a way of saying you matter to me, the earth matters to me, being kind to myself and others matters to me. You are not invisible or forgotten. You are seen. You are heard. You are appreciated.

Healing can take many forms. Sometimes, it is physical, but not always. It can be mental, emotional, and spiritual too. Healing doesn't have to mean fully recovering from a health condition, nor is it always equated with a cure. Rather it may be learning to live with chronic pain or illness, for example, in more positive ways. With empathy, you'll bring lovingkindness to healing whether it manifests in small or large ways.

This book focuses on the three main power points of empathy: showing it to yourself, showing it to others, and showing it to the greater world. Empathy is the practice of giving and caring with intention. I'm aware that my well-being and usefulness to others is fueled by being good to you—and also by receiving good from you. That is how empathy flows: both ways.

I wrote *The Genius of Empathy* to support your healing journey. Reading it and using the exercises I suggest will show you ways to approach each day and love yourself through anything, even if you feel lost now. It answers practical questions such as, "How do I have empathy if I'm getting a divorce? If my family treats me unfairly? If I'm overwhelmed or in chronic pain?" The most challenging situation for me is when a loved one is suffering. I'll share what I've learned about coping with this so you can

apply it too. I'll go on to provide a road map for how to use empathy at work to improve your communication with coworkers who may be hard to get along with and model grounded ways to support kindness and innovation in your team.

## Who This Book Is For

*The Genius of Empathy* is for everyone who is interested in self-healing and in communicating more effectively in relationships. This book is for all caring people: quiet-loving introverts and empaths as well as extroverts who thrive on stimulation and ambiverts who are a combination of both. It's also for those who may be curious about being more empathic but don't know where to begin. Perhaps your spouse or coworker piqued your interest, so you want to explore.

As part of developing empathy, you'll learn how to avoid absorbing the stress, symptoms, or emotions of others, a skill set that will make you feel safer navigating the world. I offer simple exercises to practice expressing empathy, especially with relationships that are difficult or draining. In addition, I will help you treat yourself with more kindness and stop beating yourself up for perceived shortcomings.

You'll learn strategies to build your empathy in smart, balanced, and comfortable ways. You'll claim your physical, emotional, and spiritual power and take charge of the heartfelt intention with which you lead your life. Empathy is an expression of goodness that you can be proud of.

This book will also help if you're tired of overthinking problems. Being unable to turn off your thoughts is painful, especially at 3:00 am when you're wide awake and counting way too many sheep. I will describe how to connect to the larger, freer you. It's the part that doesn't need to exhaust yourself by forcing solutions or listening to your monkey mind's incessant chatter, which is jammed with opinions and judgments that don't usually get you anywhere but stuck. My Taoist teacher said about himself,

“Judith, I don’t get as bothered by things because I don’t think as much as you!” As a physician, I’ve learned that despite its virtues, the analytic mind alone is too limited to achieve the depth of healing and calm that we all can find.

Though suffering is always an aspect of life—sometimes we have more, sometimes less—I’ve also watched the victory of how my patients’ empathy comforts their suffering. My outlook is that life either brings us blessings or blessings in disguise, at least in some respects. So we can choose to learn from everything. Empathy isn’t just “the right thing to do.” It can lessen suffering and stop you from waging war with yourself or others. In service to the heart, it is a heroic act.

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**Empathy softens the struggle, quiets the unkind voices, and lets you befriend yourself again.**

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I’m fascinated that the word *empathy* comes from the ancient Greek *empathēia*, which means passion or suffering. I agree with the “passion” part but disagree with the stereotype that primarily links empathy with discomfort or feeling overwhelmed. As you’ll see, with the proper tools, the “suffering” part becomes optional. Also, empathy has been used to describe how we aesthetically connect with inspiring art or music. I love that because we’re each a work of art, and we create our own unique music. Empathy helps us know this about one another.

So, it’s with great excitement that I invite you to explore this caring, less-traveled path with me. I am honored to be your guide to help you develop and refine this skill and overcome any obstacles or fears that you might face. This path gets wider and richer the further you go. Also, it’s full of surprises and many ah-ha moments that keep you close to your inner wisdom.

I choose to live my life by the codes of empathy and love. I choose to take a deep breath and start again when I lose faith in myself and the world. Every day, I am a student with a beginner's mind—a marvelous, fresh way to live. Come join me on this journey of empathy and the infinite blossoming of your heart.





PART 1

Healing  
Yourself,  
Soothing Your  
Nervous  
System



# What Is the Genius of Empathy?

## Becoming the Best Version of Yourself

WE ARE LIVING IN wild, sacred times.

In this era of polarization, division, addiction, and scarcity, empathy is key to our survival. We are more isolated and lonely than ever. It all can rightfully seem like “too much,” and it is—at least, for your logical mind. That’s where the genius of empathy comes in. It gives you a wiser, more loving inner resource to guide you and let you view difficulties with more empathic, discerning eyes.

My overriding reason for writing this book is to convey that there is great hope—and that a key to thriving and surviving in these times is empathy. It’s never too late to tip the scales toward compassion and goodness. A lack of empathy has helped get us into this personal and global predicament. Reclaiming it will help get us out. Empathy completes our humanity and gives us the strength to seek wisdom beyond the narrow confines of our minds. I’ll show you how this is your chance to shine and to see crises as both danger and opportunity, as the Chinese word for crises suggests.

I've called this book *The Genius of Empathy* because it covers a wider territory than how empathy is typically defined. It embraces and goes beyond even our magnificent empathic impulse to be caring with others during stressful times.

I want to give you practical examples of what healthy empathy looks like in the world so you can find it too. This book isn't about staying the same. It's about change and growth and wonder when you lead an empathic life. It's about having room to explore who you really are rather than being limited to the small box your family or society may have put you in.

Choosing empathy is your chance to be extraordinary. It can be such an unexpected action that it changes the rules of tit-for-tat power games and opens new communication breakthroughs. In this book, I'm asking you to be different, to be better, and yes, to change. Instead of simply trying to solve a problem on the problem's level, which doesn't always work, the genius of empathy helps you see from your heart to find the right solutions and perspectives. Becoming empathic leaders and teams, empathic health-care practitioners, and empathic parents, families, and friends will provide exciting new ways to relate to each other. This book is about how to live the empathic paradigm in new and creative ways in daily life.

Empathy is contagious. One act of empathy stimulates another, then another. But you must be the one to initiate it. Practicing empathy each day matters. The smallest of gestures toward yourself, another, or the earth count if you want to shift the energy in your life and the world from war to cooperation. The noble goal is simply trying to understand each other.

Empathy is not something you have to do. The gift doesn't work like that. You have to want it. If you don't, may your chosen path be everything you need it to be. As a healer, my way has never been to try to convince anybody of anything that doesn't resonate for them. However, if you are drawn to empathy or are even slightly

curious about how it can enhance your life and relationships so you can stop struggling so much, this book is for you. If you feel stuck or frustrated at home, at work, or in another area, empathy will light the fire of possibility within you to be your best self.

I'm presenting empathy as a skill that you can increasingly develop to navigate both adversity and happiness as compared to sympathy, which is mainly feeling sad for someone's distress. Having empathy for what you're going through offers solace when you feel overwhelmed, in pain, empty, or are losing faith in yourself—and also when you want to revel in the sheer joy of caring and giving. Empathy is the antidote to the frantic state of overthinking and chronic worry. Connecting with your heart can help heal your pain and clutching. Empathy is an energy shifter that starts with you and expands outward to create beneficial change.

But, like some of my patients, you may wonder, *What good will empathy do when my own and the world's problems seem so daunting?* In the following chapters, you will appreciate how powerful it is to simply sit quietly by a candle and search for empathy in your own heart. One person's heart wishing for the good of another is an incredible source of transformation.

## **The Difference Between Empathy and Compassion**

Empathy and compassion are related to each other, but they are different in subtle ways.

Typically, empathy is defined as the ability to attune to other people's emotions, a way of "feeling with them." Empathy is about first connecting to someone's emotions and perspective. For instance, when a friend gets fired, you feel their pain. However, with empathy, you need to learn how to remain attuned to the other person *without taking on their discomfort*. This intimate level of connecting has its own incredible satisfaction and depth.

On the other hand, compassion is when you “feel for” someone and go into action to help. It is more about sending lovingkindness to a person who is suffering than experiencing what they feel. With compassion, you have a bit more distance so you’re less likely to absorb others’ stress and become drained. On a biological level, compassion signals our hormones and brain chemistry to be of service. So, when your friend gets fired you might find specific ways to support them during this trying time. Your emphasis is on the other person as opposed to your own feelings and responses. Generally, compassion is associated with more ease, whereas untrained empathy can be depleting until you learn strategies to stay centered and enjoy this type of caring too.

Empathy and compassion play a central role in healing. You might find it easy to feel both for people you care about. But I’m also going to take you through various scenarios where empathy and compassion may be harder to find, such as when you don’t like someone. I reference both empathy and compassion throughout the book, though I emphasize empathy, which requires a specific skill set to avoid getting overwhelmed by others’ stress. Also, compassion is often a response to empathizing with someone that can spark our impulse to help, but not everyone with empathy is spurred into action. I am fascinated by the unique spectrum of rewards and challenges that empathy offers and how it can enhance compassion in our lives.

## **Exploring the Genius of Empathy**

The scope of empathy goes light-years beyond being a truly “nice thing to do” and how we typically relate to each other. Empathy is a form of emotional intelligence that you can learn and develop. It’s a daily healing practice with specific skills that will illuminate every aspect of your life.