

## EMPATHY STARTS AT HOME!

*"Create loving, accepting space around people and this will put irresistible pressure on them to grow to fill it"*  
Mac Andrews

*"If you look to others for fulfillment, you will never truly be fulfilled. If your happiness depends on money, you will never be happy with yourself. Be content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you."*  
Lao Tzu

In the last issue, I talked about empathy as a core emotional competence for building relationships, influencing people, and getting buy-in based on the ability to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motives of another.

However, why is it that empathy is now recognized to be so important for personal resilience and well-being? It's because our ability to be empathic with others starts with our ability to be empathic towards ourselves!

Like so many other abilities and qualities that we've been taught (or admonished!) to practice with others – charity, kindness, paying attention to others' needs first (also known as not being selfish), acceptance – our ability to genuinely embody and demonstrate empathy depends on whether we can have it for ourselves.

Another way to think about empathy is through the lens of acceptance and non-judgment. Our ability to be empathic with another clearly reflects acceptance and lack of judgment about them. Yet if we don't accept certain aspects or qualities in ourselves, how can we possibly be empathic with others when we witness those same qualities?

Genuine and complete self-acceptance is a challenge for many people. Lack of empathy can show up as being hard on oneself (generally or specifically), or it can be a blind spot totally outside our awareness.

C.G. Jung named those aspects of ourselves that we disown as the "shadow self." Thus, while we may not recognize ourselves as having certain "undesirable" traits, those are often the very things we non-empathically judge and reject in others.

What are some of the things where we commonly lack empathy towards ourselves? There seem to be certain key areas, that when challenged by someone else or triggered by some action we ourselves have taken, provoke self-judgment:

- Things that challenge our competence (mistakes, areas where we don't feel competent that become apparent in day-to-day life such as conflict management, money, power and authority, emotion regulation, to name but a few)
- Values – both those to which we subscribe and those which we reject

- Feelings that are uncomfortable or intolerable for us
- Characteristics we deem as desirable or undesirable

For example, if you have perfectionist tendencies you may be unforgiving towards yourself or others when mistakes are made. Or, if I violate a value I espouse such as fairness, integrity, or equality, I may judge myself harshly, as well as those whom I also perceive, rightly or wrongly, to violate that value.

Likewise, when we see certain behaviors that we attribute to characteristics or values we view as negative, it's a good bet that we'll have difficulty being empathic.

I had a client who, when she saw others seeking to acquire things for themselves, labeled – and rejected – that behavior as "selfish" and "greedy." Yet, on further inquiry, it turned out that she rejected her own "greediness", which was actually a desire to be more assertive in getting her needs and desires met. Thus, her judgment grew out of a belief acquired in childhood, that attempting to get her needs met was selfish and greedy.

What's the value in paying attention to your personal empathy quotient?

1. When you are un-empathic and judgmental toward those things that consciously cause you trouble, it's difficult to look at them and work with them. With empathy, you can do just that, allowing you to develop greater self-efficacy and competence in those areas.
2. Becoming aware of your unconscious shadow self or blind spots gives you access to motivations, needs, and desires that may actually be a source of untapped power for you.

Remember my client who rejected "greediness"? When she reclaimed her own "greediness", she was able to act more fully on her own behalf, achieve greater competence and authority in creating what she wanted and needed, thus enhancing her sense of personal power.

Would you benefit from being less hard on yourself? If so, ask yourself what judgments you make about yourself that might be limiting your effectiveness or your desired results? Then, practice releasing the judgment. Creating loving spaciousness in your self will certainly allow something new to emerge!