A LINE ON LIFE

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Empathy, a Major Component for Survival *

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Empathy is often confused with sympathy. **Sympathy** is feeling sorry for those who are in distress. **Empathy** is more than that. It has two aspects – affective and cognitive. The **affective** component is when a person feels as another does – either the exact feeling or a similar emotion. (This is not the feeling of "*pity*" that accompanies sympathy.) The **cognitive** component involves understanding what another feels and why. It allows us to move beyond our survival to helping others.

Over 20 years ago, psychologist Martin Hoffman (New York University) theorized a model for the development of empathy. Research has supported his theory. In his model, empathy starts to develop as infants see themselves as different from others. This happens late in the first year. Rather than viewing the distress as their own, they begin to perceive that it is others who are distressed. Even so, they still become upset and go to their mothers.

After the first year, infants often try to help others in distress. They use methods that helped them previously – they might offer their teddy bear or take the child to their mother.

By the age of two, children understand that everybody has their own internal emotions. They have empathetic concern, understanding, and a supply of comforting behaviors. By 4 or 5, children can understand that social situations can cause distress. They gain this insight by early forms of **role taking**. One form is **self-focused** – they put themselves in the other's place and imagine what is happening to others is happening to them. Role taking can also be **other-focused**. Knowledge of the others – their personal situation, their desires and fears – can help them imagine what distress others feel.

Psychologist Nancy Eisenberg (University of Arizona) and her associates found that our response to the distress of others depends on how well we regulate our emotions. Some children become overaroused by seeing others in stress. These children respond with personal distress and show less empathy to others than children who can control their emotional responses.

Although there is some natural development of empathy, environment also shapes it. Greater empathy is shown by infants whose mothers show more warmth. Children are also more empathetic, if their mothers give them clear explanations about how others suffer negative effects from their hurtful behaviors. These messages are more likely to be given to girls than boys. "*Because empathetic caregiving is important for survival,*

parents may begin to prepare their girls for this role." Boys consistently score lower than girls on measures of empathy. In contrast, some mothers control their children with anger. These children become less empathetic.

In Hoffman's model, it helps for parents to point out the harmful consequences of hurtful behavior. Children will pay more attention to their empathetic tendencies. They will feel empathy-based guilt, if they have cause another person harm. However, there is a danger if children blur the separation between empathy and guilt. They may begin to blame themselves for the suffering of others, even if it is not their fault.

We tend to be more empathetic to people who are *similar to ourselves*. This can restrict empathy. Men empathize more with men, and women empathize more with women. Members of ethnic, religious or racial groups are more likely to empathize with ingroup members than outsiders. Even socioeconomic level can restrict empathy to ingroup members.

Rather than contempt, familiarity is more likely to breed empathy.

On the other hand, feeling empathy with others can make them seem more similar. Psychologist Janet Strayer (Simon Fraser University) had 73 children (ages 6-13) view a video of people in distress. Afterward, the children were told to place each person on a continuum to indicate how similar the others were to them. The more empathy the children indicated toward someone in the video, the more similar they rated that person.

> *"When we are empathetic with somebody, it makes our dissimilarities similar."*

Interacting with people from other groups will help us become more empathetic toward them. However, we do not have the resources to help everyone. This means most of our helping efforts will go to those who are closest to us. (I receive mailings asking for money for a variety of good causes. I feel a little guilty, because I cannot give to them all. When I give funds, they typically go to causes that are most familiar to me. These are usually causes I know, because they relate to people who are important to me.)

Strayer summarizes the importance of empathy in terms of our survival.

> *"It is a form of nonverbal communication, letting us know when others are distressed or in danger. It allows us to understand another's feelings, motivating a desire to help. And it gives people a sense of 'I am like you and you are like me.' In short, we wouldn't be able to live without it."*

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* Adapted from Beth Azar's "Defining the trait that makes us human" and "Can your dog empathize with you?" *The APA Monitor*, November, 1997, pages 1, 15.