



Empathy and Autism

This is taken from a much longer blog. I describe how empathy works for me. Everyone is unique – regardless of neurology. My experience of empathy is different to some other autistic people's experiences. Why not read other autistic writing too? <https://anautismobserver.wordpress.com/> has a list of blogs written or cowritten by autistic people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. My views are my own and change and develop as I grow as a person.

Lots of people have written about autism and empathy - and far better than I can attempt to. You may have heard that autistic people don't have empathy because they lack theory of mind and can't imagine how another person thinks and feels; you may have heard that autistic people have too much empathy because they feel absolutely everything. There are different types of empathy anyway - emotional, cognitive, and compassionate, for instance. There is no universal definition of how empathy works for autistic or non-autistic people.

This is my personal blog so I'll describe how empathy works for me - but remember that we're all different. Some friends of mine who are autistic feel other people's emotions so strongly and intuitively they find it overwhelming :

My sensory processing is very different to a typical person's. I hear, smell and see things intensely and notice the details that others miss - in fact I can't filter any of this out which makes it tough to concentrate or relax; I flinch and jump at a light touch on the arm or an annoying label in my jumper but don't notice I've left half my dinner on my face! I need to walk and do strong physical activities so that I know where my body is and what it is doing or I'll bump into things and trip over endlessly. It is frightening and disorientating to feel so detached from my body at times.

And internally, my interoception is such that I have attempted to "walk off" a dislocated knee; I have managed several hours of contractions during labour by using breathing techniques and not a cry passed my lips; I may not notice I am coming down with the flu but I will feel unbelievably depressed instead for no reason. I can feel no emotion whatsoever when someone dies or there is a tragic accident - but then it hits me later and then I appear to be dwelling on it, not letting it go and attention seeking, and surely "I should be over it by now". I don't have a great sense of what I am feeling and what I do feel is not necessarily accurate so I do not trust my "gut feeling", in fact, I may not even

have one! So, if I have no idea what I am feeling then how on earth am I going to know how you are feeling?

What I understand is gained by observation and learning. I have read a great many books and I have a career in working with people, either in a supportive role, or as a manager. My colleagues include support workers who demonstrate daily how social interactions work; psychologists who tell me "why" people do what they do; psychiatric nurses and psychiatrists who explain "what went wrong" and a multitude of other professionals and families and individuals that I learn from every single day.

So I have developed a good knowledge bank about what people do, some of the potential reasons why, and what an appropriate response should be. And even better, in work this stuff is written down and as long as everyone is consistent and responsive to learning and adapting, then if you follow a person's support plans or risk assessments you can interact in a meaningful way with people who are really distressed and struggling with communication. It makes me look rather good at all this people skills stuff!



My belief system is one of my own. I have explored religions and share many principles and ways of living my life with a number of different faiths and beliefs but ultimately I don't believe in any of them at all. I do believe in "doing the right thing", in "being kind" and enabling people to be themselves so long as they are causing no harm. I am absolutely solid and unswaying in my beliefs. People call this integrity. This is what causes me to be the person speaking out against injustice even though it could be detrimental to my career. It means that I can regulate my own behaviour and act in a fair and consistent way towards other people because I have no ulterior motive and I'm not doing it just to conform or fit in or because I'm frightened of getting into trouble if I don't.

I don't "feel" empathy particularly and this can be very useful when supporting someone who is upset or when I managed a residential service for people who displayed challenging behaviour. My reactions don't tend to trigger other people, there is nothing for their distress to feed off coming from me and I tend to create naturally calm environments around me where emotions don't escalate because of my interactions or behaviour. I "know" that certain

behaviours in another person mean certain things and I combine my knowledge of the individual or situation, and my personal beliefs to create my response to their situation. The downside is, if I have misunderstood, or it is a new situation then I don't know the "rules". It is also relentlessly exhausting.

Recently I asked a colleague for tips on managing a new situation I had not come across before - the particular type of small talk being used in the Covid-19 pandemic between people who don't know each other well and want to vent about it. I don't want to dismiss people, invalidate them or escalate their anxieties but I don't want to hang around and catch or spread something either! She said that when someone random starts talking to me about coronavirus I can use this technique: "Acknowledge (e.g. yes, it is terrible), Divert (e.g. but the weather has been lovely, have you seen all the birds?), Walk away (e.g. I must get going now, bye)" This is a perfect way of managing the situation and explained to me in a way that I can learn off by heart and apply in a number of settings. It also saves me from looking rude, disinterested, or going off on a tangent. I have added this to my encyclopaedic knowledge of how to get by in life. This is how I operate. It can feel a bit false and on a bad day I wonder whether I'm some kind of robot and not human, but this is how life has always been for me.



So this is how my empathy works: It is a practical application of doing what is right for the person I am empathising with. I used to think empathy was about finding something in common with the person that we can both relate to and talking about that because that's how it looks like to me when I observe empathy in the general population. But that can feel very invalidating for the person and is as if I am hijacking their emotional situation, or attention seeking, or making it all about me. I try and avoid that, but it is a difficult balancing act that I frequently get wrong. For the people that know me, it doesn't matter. They understand that my intentions are good and about being caring, but my actions may appear random, blunt or insensitive. It's no big deal to them but it holds me back from interacting more with others because of my fear of getting it wrong and being misunderstood. Empathy is extremely complex and difficult to get correct.