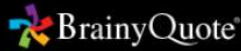# BRIEF 5 - EMPATHY

Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself.
Mohsin Hamid

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference, that is, the capacity to place oneself in another's position - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empathy

Affective empathy involves sharing the emotional experience of another person. If they feel anger, you feel anger too.

Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand the emotions of others. If another person feels sad, you can put yourself in their shoes and understand why it is they feel sad.

Empathy has a range of benefits, focused very much around our relationships. Understanding how others think and feel helps us develop closer relationships, helps us feel more connected to others, helps us function better in settings like workplaces where there are lots of different people, and helps us respond more appropriately to others in distress.

In this topic, we asked two psychologists the question – '**Can we teach empathy?**'. One of them (*Sarah*) responded from the point of view of her work with individuals who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder, who can struggle with taken the perspective of others. The other (*Karen*) responded from the perspective of whether social media might be negatively impacting on empathy in young adults, and whether this could be corrected.

Having read their responses, your challenge is to develop a device/ communication strategy / psychological aid that could help teach empathy in one of these settings: individuals that have an Autism Spectrum Disorder or young adults interacting on social media. The area you choose will impact on which psychologist you will direct your initial questions towards.

SARAH'S ANSWER

Humans are a social species. For 'successful' living and relating, empathy is an invaluable skill (Bosnjakovic & Radionov, 2018).

One of the ingredients of empathy is Theory of Mind (TOM), a cognitive (i.e. thinking based) capacity to on take another person's perspective, to be able to imagine what it could be like to be in someone else's shoes. It is a person's capacity to understand that other people have their own feelings, thoughts, preferences and plans, AND that these might differ from one's own. It also involves the capacity to understand how one's behaviour may impact upon another person.

TOM is an important ingredient for empathy, humour, and successful social interactions. This skill is usually developed between the ages of 3 and 5 years, however some research suggests this can start as early as 18 months.

TOM skills are necessary to be able to effectively empathise with others and to develop and maintain positive relationships with others. Without such skills, one can unintentionally offend or harm others, which impacts upon making and keeping friends and relationships at home, school, hobbies and work.

Anyone can potentially benefit from improving their TOM skills. However, the literature identifies that individuals diagnosed with the following types of conditions can have skill deficits in this area:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Brain Injury
- Schizophrenia
- Dementia
- Stroke

In my work I deal a lot with individuals on the Autism Spectrum, particularly children. Children who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are more likely to have difficulties with the cognitive aspect of empathy compared to neurotypical children (Deschamps, Been & Matthys, 2014; Bons et al, 2013). As such, psychoeducation about and teaching of TOM concepts can be worthwhile for those on the Spectrum. Anecdotally, I have found success when working with individuals over extended periods (6+ months, sessions every 2-3 weeks with family/school/etc support outside of sessions).

You can teach TOM in a variety of ways. For example, you can use role plays in individual therapy or group therapy settings where participants can learn and practice behavioural responses - what to do - when faced with different situations (e.g. Attwood, 2013).

The purpose of this brief however is to explore new and interesting ways to teach TOM. So I've created a scenario that is common for practising psychologists. That scenario is your design challenge.

With this in mind, I've created a common scenario for practising psychologists who work in this area.

SCENARIO

Psychologist, Ms Mind Reader has contacted you for help. She is working with a client who is experiencing difficulties getting along with others, which has led to social isolation and symptoms of depression. Upon further exploration it is apparent to Ms Reader that the client has difficulties taking the perspective of others and understanding how what they say and do might come across to other people. She asks you to design a product to help the client improve their perspective taking skills.

As a starting point, she gives you the Theory of Mind Scale (TOM Scale, Peterson, Wellman, & Liu, 2007, in Slaughter, 2015, p. 170) which identifies six key components of TOM: Diverse Desires, Diverse Beliefs, Knowledge Access, False Belief, Hidden Emotion and Sarcasm (next page).

TOM Scale

Diverse Desires	Different people may like and want different things. *For example, my favourite colours are red, green, and purple. Another person's might be black.*
Diverse Beliefs	Different people can hold different beliefs about the same thing. *For example, there are many different political views, and different people support different political parties.*
Knowledge Access	People who see something also know about it; if they do not see, then they do not know. *For example, there is a "Wet Paint" sign on one side of a bus shelter. Only those who see the sign will know this; those on the other side may get paint on their clothes.*
False belief	People do things based on what they think, even if they are mistaken. *For example, I attended my GP's office at 10:30am, as that is when I thought my appointment was booked. However, it was actually scheduled for 10:00am – I forgot to check my appointment card!*
Hidden emotion	People can deliberately conceal emotions by facial expression management. *For example, a stranger on the street starts yelling at me for no reason. I am distressed but keep a neutral expression on my face whilst getting away as I do not want to inflame the situation.*
Sarcasm	In order to be humorous, people sometimes say the opposite to what they really mean. *For example, if you ask me on a Friday if I would like to stay back and work another few hours, I would laugh and excitedly say "sure!" I am joking – I am exhausted by Friday!*

THE CHALLENGE OF THIS BRIEF BASED ON SARAH'S SCENARIO

Your task is to design a product that can assist individuals to further develop their Theory of Mind (TOM) skills, to then apply to their daily lives and interactions that could be used by Ms Mind reader in her practice.

KAREN'S ANSWER

Empathy is generally claimed to be a skill or ability that enhances connection or attachment in relationships and assists to build rapport (e.g. in a therapeutic alliance). Its absence creates conflict or dysfunction in relationships (see Siegel, 2012). Its presence (e.g. empathic concern and perspective taking) predicts comfort with closeness (Joireman, Needham & Cummings, 2001) and hence has implications in healthy relationships.

It is commonly understood that empathy is multidimensional (cognitive and behavioural states) and that individuals are not born with innate empathy but learn to become empathic through social learning or behavioural conditioning (Alloway et al 2014). Other research has indicated that nurturing assists empathy to develop into a habit (see Gordon, 2009).

There is concerning evidence of the increase of narcissism among young adults (see Alloway 2014) and the links between social media use, empathy and narcissism are being explored in a number of ways. There is no conclusive evidence that social media use is a contributing factor to narcissistic tendencies, but there has been considerable debate on this question. Given it is unlikely that research will unequivocally demonstrate a causal link between social media use and narcissism, there are nevertheless questions about the contribution social media or social networking site use may have in developing and maintaining empathy in relationships.

Specific questions for mental health where social networking and social media with respect to empathy are:

1. Does using social media promote or impair development of empathy?
2. Is there a psychosocial developmental stage during which social media use could impair development of empathy?
3. Can social media use reverse the development of empathy? Is it possible that too much social media can have a detrimental impact on empathy?
4. Is it possible that social media use can impair the development and practice of using empathy in real face to face interactions?

THE CHALLENGE OF THIS BRIEF BASED ON KAREN'S EXPLANATION

With these questions in mind, the challenge of this brief is to reflect on your own social media/ social networking use, and that of your friends and colleagues and then develop a device/ communication strategy / psychological aid that encourages increased empathy amongst those regularly using social media and social networking.

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SOME EMPATHY REFERENCES

Both Sarah and Karen provided additional references for those seeking to learn more about empathy, theory of mind, and autism spectrum disorders.

Sarah's references

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