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*“Pity is feeling sorry for someone;  
empathy is feeling sorry with someone.”*

*-Martin Luther King*

## CHAPTER ONE



### **What is Empathy?**

**E**mpathy comes from the Greek word *empathia*, and the root meaning is feeling. In other words, empathy is the ability to identify with and understand somebody else's feelings. It means being able to experience their joys and suffering. If you have ever cried at a movie, or felt tearful listening to someone talk about a problem, it was probably because you put yourself in the shoes of the person you were listening to. In some way, you felt someone else's distress and pain. That is empathy.

Other ways to think about and describe empathy include: feeling compassion, being understanding, being sensitive, and identifying with others' feelings. Words that do not describe empathy include: self-centered, harsh, indifferent, resistant, discouraging, unsupportive, impatient, angry, inconsiderate, hostile, irritated, selfish, mean, abusive, or cynical.

Being empathic doesn't just happen to you. It is not something you simply "do" or learn in a few minutes or a few days. It is normally learned in childhood when a parent shows empathy for their child by taking care of them when they are hurt, or having a sad face at the same time. It is learned when a parent expresses empathy for the child. It is learned by feeling deeply and paying very close attention to the real feelings of others. It must be developed and cultivated over time. It is like growing a garden. After the seeds are sown, the budding plants must be tended carefully; fertilized, watered, weeded, and watched for insects. If you do all this, and pay close attention, you will end up with strong, healthy plants, and a good harvest.

### **Why Bother with Empathy?**

If you were an empathic person you would be a kind and helpful person. You would not abuse or harm others. It would be much more difficult for you to deliberately hurt others after looking them in the eyes and understanding what they felt.

You may have occasional flashes of feeling concern and caring for people that you know. But either it doesn't happen very often, or it's combined with figuring out how you can use the situation or the feelings to get something you want. For example, you might feel enough concern for your mother to

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do errands for her occasionally, but another time, you're stealing money from her purse. Or, you may pretend that you are concerned about a friend's sick child by picking up medicine at the drug store, when in the back of your mind you're thinking, "Good, now I can ask her to babysit my kid next weekend."

On the other hand, you may be an empathic person until something happens and you get angry and lash out toward others. Then all that empathy drains away, and you don't even see the person in front of you anymore. That person is no longer a real live human being like you, with their own feelings. They become an object when all you focus on are your feelings and needs. You may be able to feel empathy for some people and not for others. Sometimes we have no empathy for people who are very different from us. There are other feelings that you might mistake for empathy, such as feeling bad about yourself, being afraid of the consequences of your actions, or being worried about yourself.

People who go out of their way to help others often do it because they feel empathy. They understand on a gut level, a feeling level, what other people are going through, and they want to help. Many, but not all people in the helping professions, such as doctors, social workers, counselors and spiritual leaders, joined their professions because they saw how much pain and suffering there was in the world, and they wanted to do something to help make it better. The experience of going to see a doctor who has empathy for your situation is a good example. Seeing a doctor who really cares about your problems, listens to what you have to say, and treats you respectfully is very different from going to a doctor who doesn't spend time with you and is only interested in making money.

To cultivate empathy requires caring for and respecting others, but to care for someone else, you have to also respect yourself and care for yourself. It is hard to give others something that you don't have.

### **Deep Down, We're All the Same**

All of us want to feel happy, and we all want to avoid suffering. We all suffer from the loss of what we like and love; people move away, our health takes a turn for the worse, what we build begins to wear away, and all living things eventually die. No matter how high we get, we always come down. We may have money today, but the bills come and the money goes. No matter how much control we think we have over life, things happen and we begin to lose the illusion that we're in control.

This does not mean that people are not accountable for their behavior! There are three things we are truly accountable for: our feelings, our thoughts, and our behaviors. We are responsible for everything we do, whether it is an act of kindness or a criminal offense. We cannot blame our past for what we do today or tomorrow. Thinking that you have the right to "make up for it" or be excused for bad behavior because you have suffered is a serious mistake. Learning from past suffering teaches you to take care with each thing you do now. Doing your best now will help you avoid unnecessary pain in the future and will give you more chances to enjoy your life.

### **Feel for Yourself so You Can Feel for Others**

Recall a time when you felt the worst. It may have been when you knew you failed badly, were put down, arrested, or went bankrupt. Remember how horrible you felt? Others feel equally bad when terrible things happen to them.

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Now think back to a time when something was happening to your body that you didn't like, and you felt powerless to stop it. It may have been a relative who insisted on kissing you when you were a child, a doctor's examination, a strip search by a prison guard, or a dentist who did not care about your pain when filling your cavity. Remember how it felt to have someone invading your physical being and personal boundaries? Others feel the same.

Now remember or imagine being the victim of a crime. By remembering the intensity and pain of your past humiliations, failures, and hurts, you can understand what it might be like to have a crime committed against you. Now you can begin to imagine how the victims felt. All victims feel intensely hurt, invaded, or helpless.

Even when you can recognize the pain, sorrow, or depression you feel after your crimes, know that the victims feel even worse. Working on appreciating how others feel by remembering your own similar experiences is a way to begin to feel empathy.

Keep in mind that the focus of empathy is not how you feel, it is how others feel. But the only way you can know this is to feel deeply yourself, and then put yourself in the other person's place.

When you have real empathy, you feel compassion for others' struggles and want to help them with their problems. When you have empathy, you don't add your weakness to their problems. You take responsibility for yourself and your actions while helping others.

### **Empathy Building Can Be Tough on Your Emotions**

As you learn about empathy, the way you look at your past actions is likely to change. Looking at what you've done may make you feel depressed, angry with yourself, guilty, ashamed, or embarrassed. This is a necessary, healthy step in developing empathy.

During times when all you feel are huge negative feelings and thoughts, you may want to give up and drown your problems with drugs, alcohol, sex, or excitement. Giving up may bring temporary relief from distressing feelings, but it will not solve your problems. Gradually, as you work on your treatment, you will begin to feel better. You can rebuild your self-esteem and your life on a foundation of honesty.

Sometimes people feel suicidal when they truly understand the pain and suffering they have caused others. If you do find yourself thinking about suicide, you must tell someone, call a suicide prevention hotline and get professional help from a therapist, counselor, or clergy person before continuing to work through this book.

A therapist can help you look at your suicidal feelings while helping you plan how to stay safe. Change is scary! With professional help, you may discover that feeling suicidal could be a last-ditch effort to hang on to your old destructive behaviors, a way to keep being self-centered, an expression of self-pity, or a way to avoid taking responsibility. Remember that committing suicide could result in a victim feeling guilty for your death. Sexually and physically abused children are especially likely to blame themselves for getting the abuser into trouble. Adding pain to a victim's experience by committing suicide is not a form of empathy. The main thing you can do for the victims is to change your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors so you don't re-victimize them or victimize others.

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## **Self-Pity is Not Empathy**

Feeling sad for someone else's misfortune is a form of empathy, feeling sorry for yourself is not. Feeling sorry for yourself is an enabling behavior: it allows you to look past your hurtful actions and continue the behavior that got you into trouble in the first place. Self-pity can keep you thinking you are a victim and not the abuser.

Many abusive people confuse self-pity with disgust for what they have done. Some feel sorry for themselves after they are arrested. They worry about their jobs and what their friends and families will think about them. They worry about going to prison and what might happen in prison. While these concerns are legitimate, they are also self-centered. Those worries are based in self-pity and are excuses to avoid thinking about the pain and expense their victims and families are suffering.

Self-pity prevents you from developing empathy. Self-pity keeps you self-centered and does not help you change and grow. When you feel sorry for yourself, you blame others for the consequences of your own actions. The more you let yourself feel self-pity, the deeper you sink into the pit of self-focused anger and resentment. It is like trying to drive a car that is stuck in the mud: The more you spin the wheels, the deeper into the mud you go. The only way through is to get out, take an honest look at the problem, and make a decision about how you can solve it.

## **Self-Disgust, Shame, and Guilt Can Motivate You to Change**

Self-disgust is different from self-pity. Disgust about the abuse you have committed, how you have hurt and damaged others, and how you have wasted your life is appropriate and realistic. This kind of negative feeling can be a step in the right direction, if you use it to motivate yourself to change and improve your life.

Feeling shame or guilt can lead either to self-pity or healthy disgust. Shame is feeling bad about who you are. Guilt is feeling bad about what you have done by sexually abusing or hurting another human being. When you feel truly ashamed of who you have become, or truly guilty about your behavior, it motivates you to improve. Feeling shame or guilt without a desire to better yourself is just another form of self-pity.

It takes hard work to avoid falling into the "pity pot." You have to believe in yourself and your ability to change. You can turn your feelings of shame and guilt into strength from looking at yourself honestly and making a commitment to create a better life for yourself. A person who likes himself and is comfortable with his own feelings is more likely to be empathic with other people.

## **Everyone Benefits from Empathy**

As you develop your capacity for empathy, it will change the way you relate to and treat other people. With empathy, you will find yourself considering their well-being. Empathy will be one more coping strategy that can help you reduce your urges to assault, harm or take sexual advantage of someone. It will also reduce the likelihood that you will act on those urges.

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Often you need to put the needs of others ahead of your own. It is not always healthy or in your best interest to put yourself first. For example, if you think of the needs of your family first and yourself second, your family will be much more peaceful, which is good for you. When others' needs are met, yours are often met as well.

For another example, when you help an unskilled person who is surviving on welfare to learn a trade, the person feels more self-reliant, you feel good, and society and the person both benefit financially. If you are a teacher and you understand a student's state of mind, you can teach better, the student learns more, and you benefit from a positive experience. When the administrators of a prison understand some of the boredom and frustration the inmates experience, they will often start recreational, educational, and treatment programs. When they do, inmates may have access to healthier, more meaningful activities, and the prison has fewer problems. Everyone wins.

Empathy improves the quality of your life. As you develop empathy, you will feel good about other people and care for them. Those caring feelings will help you feel good about yourself. When you feel the beginnings of confidence in yourself, realize that you can have satisfying adult relationships, and know your work on yourself is important, you will understand that controlling and hurting others is not a good way to get your needs met.

Understanding the meaning of empathy and its benefits is taking a major step forward in your recovery. Treatment is not always easy, but the returns are long-lasting if you work hard.

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## Chapter One Assignments

— Do Not Write In This Workbook —

**1**

How would you define empathy?

**2**

List at least five people (use their first names only and list what their relationship is to you, such as a friend, your sister-in-law, a neighbor) who have problems that are as great or greater than yours. The people on your list might have severe problems with: mental health, physical health, finances, children, parents, spouses, work, basic survival, or being harassed by someone.

How do their problems affect their lives? How do they feel?

**3**

What is it like to grow old? Either write from your experience, ask someone you know, or read about it. In a way, this is thinking about your own future: if you do not die of disease, accident, or violence, you will experience growing old.

**4**

Try to put yourself in your parents' shoes. What is a typical day like for each of them? What is hard and what is easy for them? What do they like and dislike? What do you think they feel and think during the day? What would they normally think about you? (If your parents are not alive, write about a time when they were, or write about another close relative for this exercise.)

**5**

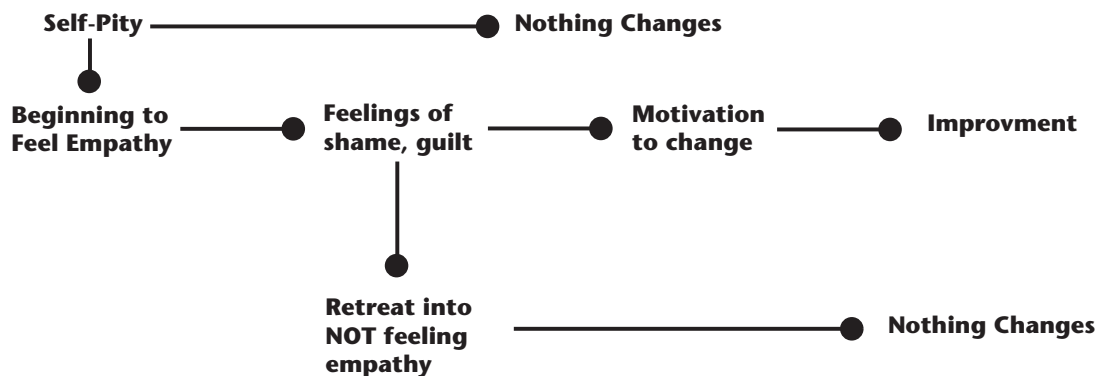
How would you know if you were in a self-pitying state? What would be the signs? How would you act? What is one thing you could do to help yourself get out of the self-pitying state?

**6**

Look back in your life and name 10 things you have done that you feel proud of.

**7**

Using the figure below, think back to times in your life when you could have felt empathy but did not. Does the figure make sense? Give examples of how you have either engaged in self-pity or made a deliberate decision to not feel empathy.



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**8**

Give examples of 10 different times this week you thought of yourself first and either ignored or considered others a distant second. Give the same example only once. (You had many more than 10 incidents, guaranteed!)

**9**

Give five examples of times in your life you helped others with no thought of reward or personal advantage, beyond feeling good within yourself for having helped.

**10**

If you learned to be empathic, how would your family or friends benefit?  
How could you benefit?