

Roots of Empathy

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Racines de l'empathie



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How do we solve the crisis of well-being?

DR. RICHARD DAVIDSON

*Neuroscientist & Founder of the
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I am a neuroscientist by training. I began my career with a simple question that is still applicable today: Why are some people more vulnerable to life's challenges than others? More recently, however, I've tried to focus more on the positive side of this question: What qualities can we develop to become more resilient?

We have an urgent need for these qualities in the world today. Rates of distractibility, loneliness, depression, and anxiety are skyrocketing. We have a crisis of well-being, and we must understand that the qualities underlying well-being can be learned. We do not have a fixed amount of kindness or empathy; rather, these skills can be nurtured through training.

This perspective is based on trends in modern science. The first of these is neuroplasticity, meaning that our brains are constantly being shaped by new experiences, often unconsciously and in ways beyond our control. However, we can still take more responsibility for our own brains by cultivating healthy mental habits. Neuroplasticity can help us understand how certain kinds of training can mould the brain and facilitate the enduring expression of empathy and compassion.

Another aspect of modern science is innate basic goodness. This means we are born with an inclination towards caring, prosocial behaviour. When studying infants, scientists have found that within the first 6 months of life, if infants are given a choice about whether to watch a cooperative, prosocial encounter or an aggressive, antisocial encounter, more than 90% of infants prefer to watch prosocial encounters. This is before learning has occurred, suggesting it is innate. Research also demonstrates that if a baby in a neonatal ICU ward begins to cry, other babies nearby are more likely to also cry. This mimicry is the early roots of empathy.

Based on this contemplative and emotional neuroscience, we are starting to understand the keys to well-being, which are vital to empathy and compassion. In this framework, there are four key pillars of well-being that can be trained and cultivated.

The first is awareness, or the ability to know what our minds are doing. The second pillar is connection, which is about the qualities needed for healthy social relationships, including empathy and compassion. The third pillar is called insight. There are people who hold beliefs about the workings of their own minds that they may not be aware of, but these beliefs shape their perception of the world. Applying awareness and having insight into the beliefs that shape our minds can liberate us from the constraints of these expectations. Finally, the last pillar is purpose. Purpose is about finding our sense of direction in life and aligning our daily behaviour around it. There is evidence that a strong sense of purpose is the foremost psychological predictor of longevity in later life. These qualities make a real difference for both our physical and psychological well-being.

Now, let's return to empathy and compassion. When a person is empathizing with someone else, they take on that person's feelings. If I am a skillful empathizer, the circuits in my brain associated with pain will activate when I empathize with someone in pain. This is how we can feel the emotions of another, which is part of empathy. Science demonstrates that exercising empathy causes changes in the brain that are similar to the person that is suffering.

The brain activity associated with compassion is very different. Compassion, unlike empathy, is the inclination to help relieve another person's suffering. There are practices from the contemplative traditions of the East that are designed to cultivate empathy and compassion. These practices highlight the different brain processes associated with each.

When a person exercises compassion, the brain circuits associated with positive emotion and action activate. Compassion prepares a person to act when suffering is encountered. Empathy and compassion are therefore connected. To empathize with someone, we need to experience some of their emotions, which is precursor for compassion. Empathy can inform us about the suffering of another person, and then we can transform that information into compassion to relieve that suffering.



Richard Davidson

This knowledge can help us develop strategies to help people, particularly in the helping professions, who experience “compassion burnout”, which is perhaps more aptly called “empathy burnout”. If we can help people transform empathy into compassion, this could be very beneficial, since compassion activates circuits in the brain associated with positive emotions. It feels good to help someone else using compassion, so it’s nourishing rather than depleting.

Each of these four pillars – awareness, connection, insight, purpose – can be strengthened through simple practice. Since we are innately prosocial, qualities associated with connection, like empathy, appreciation, and compassion, can be strengthened easily. Research shows that even a few minutes of practicing these qualities can produce a change in objective behavioural and biological measures.

We humans haven’t been brushing our teeth since we first evolved, but I’m sure everyone here brushes their teeth. This isn’t part of our genome, it’s something we’ve learned to do because it’s important for our health. Similarly, cultivating empathy and compassion is important for our mental hygiene, and if we spent even as short a time as we spend brushing our teeth on practicing these qualities, we believe the world would be a very different place.

Our Centre has an associated non-profit that has developed an app including these four pillars of well-being. You can learn more about it by going to the website tryhealthyminds.org and downloading the free app, available worldwide. You can learn how to engage in simple practices for just a few minutes a day to nurture qualities such as empathy and compassion. We invite you to nourish your own well-being and join us on this journey.

Black Fatherhood: A Conversation Across Borders

JIMMIE BRIGGS

Journalist, Writer & Activist



Jimmie Briggs

JESSE LIPSCOMBE

*Actor, Activist, Entrepreneur &
Founder of #MakeItAwkward Campaign*



Jesse Lipscombe

What are you most optimistic about when raising children of colour?

Jesse: I am most optimistic about the fact that there are more and more children of colour being born and raised by the second. “Love loves love” and with growing numbers people’s voices are amplified and there are more people caring about people of colour’s existence in the world.

Jimmie: I am most optimistic about this moment in time despite all the global and social challenges that we are facing. Conversations are happening where they weren’t before. Visibility allows people to connect and share as well as learn. The way forward is through. Historically, a lot of these conversations were only happening in Black communities and now they are being brought to people of other ethnicities. They increase awareness about things that not everyone experiences.

What differences can these conversations create?

Jesse: These conversations increase awareness of systemic barriers and the intergenerational trauma that BIPOC experience. I'd like to bring up this idea of 'code switching' which is when Black people or other POC act or speak differently within different social contexts. This is often a survival technique. With these conversations now happening there can be a door opened for Black people to live authentically and thrive.

Code switching as a survival skill for BIPOC

Jimmie: Many Black people who grew up in the United States were taught that "white is right" and that many elements of Black culture were deemed to be unprofessional, unrefined, or uncultured or not "western enough". When you wear these so-called 'masks' you are masking your own humanity and dignity.

Jesse: Your proximity to whiteness becomes a privilege in itself. This was something I was often defensive about. I recently realized that this is often why code switching is a beneficial thing to do for any level of success or for safety. This is why I strive to be my most authentic self in every scenario I am in regardless of the comfort of the people around me because white culture has not been comfortable for me. Getting to this point of authenticity has been an intersection of privileges. Having certain privileges growing up (eg. class, athletic talent) allowed me to not have as much pushback for being myself. When you recognize that you hold privilege it is your duty to speak up for those who don't.

Black fatherhood and raising the next generation

Jimmie: As my children get older I am able to be more singular in my parenting and to recognize the challenges to my children's inherent joy and laughter. I strive to help maintain that joy as well as to grow their imaginations. I also have conversations with my daughters that in an age appropriate way don't sugar coat things. Whether this is about white supremacy, homophobia, sexism etc. We all have the inherent power within ourselves to protect the light within ourselves.

Jesse: When raising my children to be both tender and tough at the same time, I think it's important for them, especially as black men, to recognize when they have the emotional bandwidth for something and when they do not. We also need to redefine what it means to be tough. To be tough is to be emotionally vulnerable and to show that to your children.

What does it mean to be a good ally?

Jimmie: I like to ask my white friends when speaking of allyship and the awareness brought on by the murder of George Floyd, where were you? It took a nine minute video of a Black man being murdered for you to care. Where were you when Black people continually experienced documented violence? Allyship is a complicated path. Reading books, watching Black films are all great things but they aren't enough. If you want to be a better ally the best thing to do is be in proximity, to listen, to ask, to challenge yourself, and engage in conversation. Allyship from white people is to deconstruct systems that historically you have benefitted from.

How do we have these difficult conversations?

Jesse: One of the first things that people who are interested in having these conversations should realize is that they are late. They are late to these discussions and movements and need to understand that before jumping in. Make It Awkward is a movement that was started about 4-5 years ago in an effort to begin having conversations with loved ones. It is based on the premise that when you are in uncomfortable situations as the observer or bystander it is your job to call these things out and ask why someone thought something was funny or why something was an appropriate comment to make. This solidarity can go so far.

Dissolving borders through empathy

DR. DANIEL J. SIEGEL

Professor of Psychiatry

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Dan Siegel

Empathy is sometimes equated with emotional resonance; it's sometimes said that too much resonance can cause burnout. This has led to a belief that empathy is negative and should not be encouraged, while compassion is positive. I find this perspective limited, as empathy is highly beneficial to our well-being and our connections with ourselves, others, and the natural world. To explore empathy from a scientific perspective, we'll be using the framework of interpersonal neurobiology which combines several different disciplines of science.

Emotional resonance, or feeling another person's feelings, is just one facet of empathy. Others include perspective-taking and cognitive empathy, which involves using knowledge of another person to understand their reality. Empathic joy involves excitement at another's successes. The fifth facet of empathy, empathic concern involves concern at another person's suffering, which leads to compassion and the urge to act.

In Roots of Empathy, I think all five facets of empathy are cultivated beautifully.

What's the connection between empathy and well-being? The relationships we have with our own experiences, with other people, and with nature can be all identified as spatial paths of energy flow. This energy is not bound by the body, but can also be shared among human beings, as in interpersonal relationships. Studies show that all three of these types of relationships are beneficial to our well-being.

In modern, individualistic culture, we generally and subconsciously equate the 'self' with one's physical body. When the self is viewed as entirely individual and separate, the default mode network in the brain is activated excessively, which can lead to poor mental health outcomes and a sense of disconnection.

However, the self is not only inside the body; if the self is considered a centre of experience, one's sense of inner life could be considered inner empathy. The self can be defined as including sensations, perspective, and agency (SPA). We all have internal SPA, but our relationships with other people and with nature are relational aspects of the self that can be sensed with these five facets of empathy.

For an exercise in shifting identity lens, take a look at your thumb, if you are able to do so. If not, you may use your hearing. Now, look just beyond your thumb and focus on a specific, nearby object; notice how it is no longer part of your body, but of the world. Next, continue to look past your thumb, but let that focused lens become wide and take in the whole panorama in front of you. Notice that the world itself also has a sensation, perspective, and agency to it; agency in the sense that you can act on behalf of the world, by supporting positive causes such as environmental protection and social justice.

This shift in perspective allows us to realize that we are all a part of one whole. The way I try to remember this broader identity lens is to realize that we have a close 'me', but we also have a relational 'we', which can be combined into the integrated identity of 'mwe', a broader belonging. That is how we let empathy blossom in our lives; together, 'mwe' can make this a more compassionate world for all of humanity and nature.

The empathy question: how does our experience of social justice impact empathy?

DR. MICHAEL UNGAR

*Canada Research Chair in
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Michael Ungar

Through studying resilience as a clinician Dr. Ungar is very focused on the idea that the people who surround us and how they treat members of their communities lead to them not feeling isolated. There is an inherent connection between the way people feel their communities respond to calls for social justice and meeting their needs. Their resilience is negotiated with those around them.

When there is a reciprocity between the community and its' individual members, there is a level of empathy that is grounding. When there is this sense of empathy being shown towards community members, they then feel confident to go forward and help others.

There are examples of people who have been treated horribly by their societies and who still find it within themselves to go forward and show empathy towards the people who are oppressing them. This, however, is not the case for the majority of people. Most people need to have a 'social contract' with the people around them so that they feel drawn to act with empathy and generosity when they are met with the same in return. Fair treatment is a part of human resilience. When people participate in community and work to build that community, resiliency and kindness are spread.

Movements like Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement and movements for Indigenous rights are having a profound impact on how the collective 'we' experiences resilience. These movements are making our societies more resilient as we are finally able to tune into each other's marginalization and pain. The more we jumpstart this cycle, the stronger it will become. When we turn to positive thinking, these thoughts will not only be in our heads but in our world which will reward us for the empathy that we show. There is a strong connection between social justice and the empathy that we experience and in turn can give to others.

The future of leadership – three powerful Canadian women on what it takes to lead

CHRISTY CLARK

Former Premier of British Columbia



Christy Clark

TAMARA VROOMAN

*CEO, Vancouver Airport Authority
Chair of the Canada Infrastructure Bank*



Tamara Vrooman

SHAHRZAD RAFATI

CEO BroadbandTV Corp

Ms. Clark, moderating the discussion, began by asking the other panelists to share how the pandemic had affected their leadership style, and if they felt that empathy could play a role in healing from the effects of the pandemic.

Responding first, Ms. Vrooman remarked that empathy is an underrated leadership trait, just as vital as vision or leadership, and that understanding the perspectives of staff and customers and designing business processes accordingly was crucial to her leadership style, especially during the pandemic. Ms. Rafati agreed, adding that empathy is more important than ever during the pandemic and that it is a defining factor of successful team-building because it encourages a team to foster the values that bring them together.

As a female leader, it is difficult to be both tough and liked, Ms. Clark continued. She asked the panelists how they navigate that to practice empathy at work while still appearing capable.

Leadership, Ms. Vrooman began, is a two-way street; an empathetic leader must be able to see and understand the experience of the other while also being willing to share experiences and vulnerabilities. She has noticed, personally, that this behaviour leads to positive changes, and expressed the importance of redefining leadership to focus more on empathy as less of a “soft skill” and more of an “essential business competency”. Ms. Rafati further pointed out that half of the women in the world do not make their own income and building an equitable business can lead to a more ethical and higher-performing organization.



Shahrzad Rafati

Ms. Clark then asked the panelists to offer some practical advice for ensuring that employees in the workplace can trust that they will be heard by leadership, and that their commentary will impact the future of the business.

During the pandemic especially, Ms. Vrooman's organization has focused on opportunities for two-way exchange, including weekly all-staff conversations, which she felt has built positive communication. She added that transparency around progress and leadership behaviours are both very important, as is accountability. Ms. Rafati agreed, also expressing pride in her team for the supportive environment they have built. The pandemic, she continued, has illustrated the importance of leadership, with different world leaders demonstrating very different results in managing the crisis, with absences in leadership keenly felt. She expressed her belief that great leadership is key to problem-solving, and empathy is, in turn, important to strong leadership.

Drawing on past experiences, Ms. Clark commented that balancing long-term, emotional investments in others with completing urgent tasks and projects can be very challenging. She asked the panellists if they felt that practicing empathy could be financially detrimental to a business, as it may distract from vital tasks.

Ms. Vrooman responded that the opposite was true: it costs an organization money to not be empathetic. Not considering the needs of your employees, customers, and communities prevents leaders from seeing risks and potential pitfalls. Innovation often stems from solving a problem from a different perspective, which can involve empathy. The two are therefore not in conflict. Ms. Rafati agreed that empathy in the workplace is highly beneficial for business. Empathy drives inclusivity, and companies that are more inclusive are higher-performing; empathy and performance therefore go hand-in-hand. Empathy builds culture, which allows leaders to better serve employees and customers, which drives innovation and positively impacts business.

Solving the Frankenstein problem: the importance of empathy and social interaction in brain development

DR. MARY HELEN IMMORDINO-YANG

*Prof. Ed, Psych, and Neuroscience
University of Southern California*

The pandemic has laid bare just how important kids' relationships and emotions are for the way they develop. The science is revealing that the empathic emotions we engage in are not just about developing one's ability to be a social person, they're also about developing the same brain platforms that are used to think about other things.

I'd like to start this talk with a painting by a colleague of mine, Margaret Lazzari, who painted this huge seascape with white squiggles in the middle. They look like waves in the water, or reflections of clouds; what they actually are is the white matter from a person's brain. A volunteer let us take pictures of their brain, and then we peeled all the little cells that do the firing off of the picture. What's left is this network of billions of tubes that are making sometimes hundreds of thousands of synaptic connections all the way down into your whole body and back up again. This is an image, to me, of the network that makes this person who she is.



Mary Helen Immordino-Yang

This network develops based on our genetics and evolutionary history, but we're also discovering that it is strikingly dependent on how we relate to others – that we have a need for interdependence on others in order to grow our brains. The patterns of thinking and feeling young people engage in shape the kind of brain they grow. That's why it's so important to help them learn to situate themselves in social relationships and to think about how their activities impact others. A program like Roots of Empathy capitalizes on this to teach young people to think purposefully about how they want to think, feel, and behave. That is the essence of healthy development.

Look at a picture of a newborn and mother immediately after birth. This is the first time they've met each other while they're both awake. Think for a moment: what's going on socially, cognitively, emotionally, and culturally in this image? The answer might be different in different places.

This newborn is asking for what she needs, that magic moment when you lock eyes with an infant. Neurologically typical infants bring into this world an automatic built-in reflex that says “when you see two dark dots in this configuration, stare”. So, what's it for? It's the beginnings of a relationship with your mother. It's the beginnings of engaging in a relationship that we hope will last our entire lives.

Our development is inherently social from the get-go. The newborn's biology expects there to be a human to look at when she opens her eyes. The mother comes thinking: “I'm expecting you to show me what you need; let's build something together”. That empathic resonance is the essence of human development. We need high-quality, direct interactions that become fodder for deeper cognitive and emotional meaning-making that extends across a person's lifespan and enables them to engage with themselves and others.

This is a song that my daughter wrote when she was in kindergarten for her baby brother, Theodore, who she calls “Teddy”. She says: “Oh, Teddy. We love you more than the whole Earth size. As the Earth spins every day, we love you as much as usual but sometimes even more as you make us proud and happy that you're you.”

What is this about? Is this a poem about this little girl's love for her baby brother? Or is this a poem about her budding interest in planetary science, which she's now studying in college? It's both. Our empathic emotions and our relationships are the foundation on which we build other kinds of knowledge. They are not separate.

In the brain, the emotions you feel utilize the same brain systems that keep you alive – that keep you conscious and able to breathe and keep your heart beating. No wonder they're so fundamental to our well-being.

When looking at an image of the brain where we can see what areas are active via neuron firing when people said they felt strongly about a social story there are some findings of note.

The first is the brain stem, a part of the brain that is essential for survival. This area is activated when people are thinking about social stories that feel meaningful to them. We also have something called the anterior insula, which is the same part of the brain that regulates your guts and viscera. These are the platforms in the brain on which we feel emotions and on which we steer our thinking. No wonder my daughter wrote a poem about her love for her brother and her understanding of the planet. They go together in our minds.

This is the essence of the Frankenstein title. Our ability to feel emotions and understand things is not a bunch of little mechanisms that scientists can stitch together. It's a deeply integrative co-layering of all these ways of being that are fundamentally about situating our own emotions – in the most direct, embodied way – into this thinking process.

Healthy development allows us to engage systematically with others in these fluid, co-constructed interactions in which we come together to construct our ways of thinking and understanding, in ways that allow us to be thoughtful humans who can work together throughout our lifespans.

Emotions happen automatically, but we need to learn how to *feel* our emotions, which is what a curriculum like Roots of Empathy does. It's among the most important work on the planet, generating well-being in our next generation of little citizens.

The beginnings of altruism and bias in children

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Co-Director

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Andrew Meltzoff

DAVID BORNSTEIN

Columnist, NY Times

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David Bornstein

Through research I have found that infants learn in a social way by observing and imitating others. I conducted a study with 15 month old babies that aimed to test the babies' ability to observe both positive and negative interactions as well as the power of emotional presence. In the first study, babies observed an adult activating a buzzer with a tool. Because babies are such prolific imitators, when they were allowed to respond naturally, they happily pressed the buzzer. The second time, the experiment was done while the adult pressed the buzzer and a second adult observed and gave negative feedback. When presented with the tool, the babies looked as though they wanted to press the button but feared it may not be allowed while they were being watched. When the person left the room, many looked to check that they were gone before quickly pressing the buzzer.

Children are able to observe negative emotions from those around them but they are also able to observe positive, generous, and altruistic behaviour in their social environments. I wanted to further research the question of "where are children picking up these signs of empathy/acting altruistically?" I decided to adapt a study done by Felix Warneken, and Michael Tomasello that observed altruism in infants. I then conducted two studies with 19 month old babies, one with biologically significant items and one with high emotional value items.

In the study which used objects of biological importance, the babies were asked to be brought to the study hungry. The babies sat across the table from an adult who held a piece of fruit. The adult then "fumbled" the fruit and dropped it onto the baby's side of the table. A large majority of the babies picked up the fruit, looked at it, and gave it back to the adult who was reaching out for it. This is a form of baby altruism wherein the babies engage in 'costly' sharing. In the second study, mothers were asked to bring in their baby's favourite toy. The babies reached out possessively when they saw their favourite toy but many of them gave it back to the adult who had 'accidentally' dropped it and was reaching for it. It is important to note that during both of these experiments, the babies' mothers were close by in the room and the babies could have taken the fruit or toy and run to their mothers.

Altruism is deeply ingrained in the human species even in the case of these 19 month old babies. This can be associated with the culture/environment that the babies are surrounded by. The babies were able to understand the needs of the adults and acted to satisfy them even when it was costly for them to share.

The presence of bias in children

I observed the power of this social learning mechanism and began to wonder whether that same mechanism might be a process for the unintentional, intergenerational transfer of bias of adults to their children.

Children by the age of 4-6 are showing signs of bias. A study was done where a vignette was shown to 4.5 year old children that depicted an adult in the middle and two people on either side. The adult in the middle greeted one person with a positive tone and one with a negative tone. The children, when asked to pick which adult they liked better, all chose the one who had been greeted positively. Their response was the same when posed with the question of sharing or learning from either person.

A further study observed the generalization of bias to other people who looked like the target of negativity in the previous study. Similarity was shown through clothing choices. The children were asked to play a game with another adult and when given the option responded that they didn't want to play with someone who looked like the target of the experiment. In other words, they generalized their bias. This is very powerful social learning and suggests that children are social pattern detectors who will look to those around them for guidance.

What is powerful about Roots of Empathy is that bringing in children and parents from different backgrounds and ethnicities can help to spread empathy to people that children may not encounter in their everyday life. When there is that social interaction and that "just like me" mechanism is switched for children, they are able to better understand and empathize with the people they encounter.

The empathy question: Why is empathy vital to the world?

DR. BRUCE D. PERRY

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Bruce Perry

One of the most gratifying things about the work that Roots of Empathy does is that it targets a human capability that is at the core of our success as a species. This is the capacity to empathize. Roots of Empathy is an experience-based program where people can experience meaningful interactions over a long period of time that allow for them to build the neurobiological capacity to connect with others and be empathic.

When you act with empathy you are far more likely to be kind, patient, listening and understanding. This allows families, communities, and cultures to work. Fostering and intentionally growing the capabilities of our children to be empathic should be a goal for all parents in all communities and cultures. This is often underappreciated in our society and is something that we need to continue educating our colleagues and the broader community about.

The work that Roots of Empathy does is world changing even if it is framed as "child changing". Changing the world one child at a time is a great way to think about what you do, but I think that Roots of Empathy on their 25th anniversary should reflect on the power and importance of what they have already done.



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