

# On the Absence of Empathy



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Douglas LaBier, who directs the Center for Adult Development in Washington, D.C., has identified a new and alarming illness afflicting Americans. According to LaBier, “empathy deficit disorder” is “a pervasive but overlooked condition with profound consequences for the mental health of individuals and our society” (“Empathy: Could It Be What You’re Missing?” *Washington Post*, December 25, 2007).

LaBier finds a number of his psychotherapy clients lacking in empathy. They include a husband deaf to his wife’s complaints, a technocrat indifferent to the long-term effects of global warming, and a financier content to dismiss the entire American Muslim community as “all terrorists anyway.”

People suffering from such blind-sidedness, according to LaBier, fail to recognize that “we’re all one, bound together.” Conversely, when we develop empathy, he tells us, we “can deepen [our] understanding and acceptance of how and why people do what they do and [we] can build respect for others.”

He’s right, I believe, but there’s more.

Empathy, by allowing us to bridge two disparate states of mind or states of being (ours and someone else’s), lets us transcend ourselves. It gives us our best shot at escaping existential loneliness, so that we feel we belong in a world with others. Just consider these polar extremes:

*Telling vs. listening.* When I insist on my version of events, disregarding yours, I cut myself off from discovering things you and I have in common. Listening gives me the chance to learn from (and about) you; if I ignore you, you may become angry and resentful.

*Knowing vs. understanding.* When I claim that my truth alone is right and dismiss your truth as incorrect because it is different, I am saying that my point of view is

superior to yours—that I am better than you. You probably will not like this idea. Instead I could admit the possibility of two coexisting truths.

*Judgmental vs. accepting.* You and I are peers. As long as I use law, brute force, or some other means to control you—unless we agree on the terms—I am declaring you deficient for being unlike me. (When you and I feel differently about things, aren't both feeling states necessarily within the spectrum of human potential? After all, both of us are human.)

*Reactive vs. adaptive.* If I insist that my knowledge alone is correct, I will need to defend myself constantly against potentially threatening ideas from people who disagree. By incorporating their viewpoints into my own, on the other hand, I might improve my own chances of surviving and prospering in the world of others.

*Individualist vs. globalist.* The never-ending effort to guard my turf against assaults, literal and figurative, may cause me to overlook global developments positive and negative. I lose an opportunity to create win-win scenarios.

*Isolationist vs. communitarian.* When I fence myself in and stay focused on the narrowest possible definition of my situation, I forfeit the support of other people like me. I also miss the chance to reach out to isolates who want to join the community.

*Short term vs. long term.* Self-absorbed and oblivious to the larger environment, I miss the opportunity to view myself and my endeavors in the context not just of my own life span but also of posterity.

Empathy orients us temporally, locally, emotionally, and spiritually. It grounds us and lets us know we belong. It nourishes the value system by which we guide our lives individually and collectively. It allows us to accept and accommodate ourselves and others, acknowledging everyone's right to a place at the world table. It gives us the basis for educating future citizens. Perhaps most important, in this age of terror, it enables us to create security for ourselves as we ensure the community's responsiveness to everyone's needs.