

# KEEPING YOUR SANITY THROUGH THE ADVENTURE OF EMPATHY

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Within each of us exists a deeply

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personal, subjective inner experience.

We may look similar, but we each have our own DNA, our own history, our own very personal experiences. We have the stories we've created that hold the meaning of our experiences, and the feelings that flow from those stories.

We have what we've brought to our circumstances in the form of choices and actions that have formed our character; and the people, opportunities, and relationships that have influenced us, blessed us, challenged us.

Within every person is a world, and our personal worlds are more unique, strange, and magnificent than most of us realize. Grasping this can turn our relationships from stale melodramas into rich adventures.

There are the more obvious differences: different ages, genders, cultures of origin, genetic makeup, family histories... those are just the qualities that are relatively easy to see or discover.

We also each have deeper complexities. Some percentage of us also struggle with depression, anxiety, addictions, other psychological challenges, or difficult and sometimes even horrific histories. These are qualities that we tend to hold more closely to ourselves – because it's possible they could be met with shame or criticism.

They are also often where we can express a very personal, unseen kind of heroism.

Our personal psychological issues can hold strength that can show up in surprising ways – people with social anxiety tend to have greater cognitive empathy; those with attention deficit disorder can make some of the best CEOs.

Many of the things that are labeled as disorders can offer challenges of self-mastery that are seldom seen or discussed, and so the very real triumphs go unappreciated. Ask a recovered addict what his or her greatest triumph in life has been, and it will likely be the triumph over addiction.

The most courageous act of a person who has experienced severe trauma is often confronting and overcoming

the effects of that trauma.

Because these are things that are often done in relative privacy, we tend to miss this as part of the normal range of human mastery; a mastery that requires time, energy, willpower, and courage.

*Empathy* is about orienting to the reality of *another person's* subjective experience. It is the desire and effort we take to understand another person. Without the attempt at understanding somebody who's different from us (namely *everyoneelse*) we don't have all of the data; we're missing part of the truth.

When we don't know a person yet, we start off by stereotyping; guessing at whom we think this person may be, based on little or no knowledge. We look for patterns by which to assess them, to get an idea of whether they're good for us or bad for us; whether we should move toward them or away.

There's nothing wrong with this, it's just human nature. But stereotyping is *only the first step* in getting to know another person. The big problems arise when we stop there, and presume that we *do* have all the data; that we know enough of their story to draw sound conclusions.

The broader the brush we paint with, the greater the problem we create. This getting stuck in stereotyping is what fuels racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry; which are extreme forms of *empathic laziness*. Empathy takes work; it takes consciousness and willpower. And it takes curiosity.

How often have you seen someone you don't know well behaving in a way you don't understand, and gone home with a story in mind of that person? Have you ever then found out what the late Paul Harvey would have called, "the rest of the story"?

- Perhaps there's a parent who isn't minding their children well, but the truth is, they're normally excellent parents, and what you don't know is that they've just experienced a devastating loss and are barely holding it together.
- Maybe there's someone who seems scared of what seems to you to be a non-threatening situation – but you later find out that it was in just that kind of situation where they were brutally attacked.
- Maybe someone lights off some fireworks, and a combat veteran with PTSD who lost his best friend to something that made just that kind of sound goes into a fighting stance – but you don't know he's a vet, and you don't know what he's been through.

These are dramatic examples, but we do this kind of thing all the time with less obvious scenarios, whenever we assume we know enough about a person.

One of the great honors of the work I do is that for over 40 years now I've been able to get to know a lot of people in more depth than we usually do – because of the confidentiality and the nature of my work, people tell me things they don't often tell other people, sometimes even those who are closest to them.

Because of this, I've had a very consistent and fascinating experience: I've found that whenever I get to know a person's story, most everything they are doing in their lives makes sense.

This doesn't mean that I *approve* of everything, of course; I've worked with some people who have done some pretty awful things in their lives. But I can *understand* why they did what they did; why they thought it was a good idea; or why it seemed to them like it was their only option at the time.

There's a sense to our lives that's often hidden in secrecy or assumptions. When we conclude too quickly our judgment of another person, we make any problem we have with them insurmountable, and we end up feeling helpless. Seeking to have greater empathy for one another is the first, essential step to problem solving in

relationships.

Kindness, empathy, and understanding are what lead to much happier relationships; and happier relationships are at the heart of a happier life.

*If you want to enjoy an immediate sense of happiness, the most powerful action you can take is to do something kind toward another person. If you want to give someone you care about a sense of joy, be curious about them, respond to them... listen to them.*

The fundamental quality that leads to greater empathy is *curiosity*. Curiosity about the other person's internal experience allows us to wonder important, meaningful things; to imagine what they might be experiencing that leads them to think or feel or behave as they do.

In my work with couples, the most common source of trouble comes down to a misunderstanding; which usually comes down to a failure of curiosity. Without curiosity, we end up assuming we know what they're thinking or feeling, and why.... If you really want to make somebody angry, tell them what they're thinking, what they're feeling, and why.

When we stop being curious, we treat the other person as a fixed entity; like looking at the cover of a book and imagining we know the whole story already. Why even read a story like that... why even get to know a person we believe we already know everything about?

My wife and I have been together for over 30 years, and part of what makes our marriage delightful is that we're still curious about each other; still learning more about each other.

When we keep our curiosity alive, we see other people as the vibrant embodiment of fresh stories; complex, growing, learning, creative beings.

And that makes any relationship an infinitely more fascinating and delightful adventure to embark upon.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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