

Developing sense of self may help individuals be more empathetic

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Empathy, or the ability to identify with others' feelings, often is considered an important relational skill. Previously, researchers had hypothesized that in order for individuals to be empathetic, they needed to be selfless. However, University of Missouri researchers found just the opposite: individuals who were more self-aware had higher levels of empathy.

Using MRI scans of individuals' brains, the researchers found empathetic individuals had increased functioning in the part of their brains associated with their sense of self. Creating interventions that help individuals develop their sense of self may help them become more empathetic, the researchers said.

"Previously, we've found the less individuals focus on themselves, the more able they are to connect with a higher power and have a spiritual experience; we also found the less individuals focus on themselves, the more likely they are to be forgiving," said Brick Johnstone, a neuropsychologist and professor of health psychology in the MU School of Health Professions. "In order to be forgiving, it may be important to focus less on the perceived wrong to the self. We thought the same would be true for [empathy](#) – if individuals focus less on themselves, they'll be able to focus more on others and be more empathetic. However, we found exactly the opposite. This is one instance when being more self-focused is related to virtuous behaviors."

Johnstone and his colleagues gave 31 individuals with traumatic brain

injury neuropsychological evaluations, and the participants answered questions about empathy. Twenty participants also received MRI scans of their brains. The researchers found individuals who were more empathetic appeared to have increased functioning in their right parietal lobe, which is the area of the brain associated with self-orientation. In previous research, Johnstone found that when this part of the brain has decreased functioning, individuals are less able to focus on themselves and are therefore more selfless. However, in the present study, increased functioning of the parts of the brain that focused on the self was associated with increased empathy. Additionally, greater empathy was associated with increased volume of the insular cortex, which perceives information about the internal states of the body, or self, Johnstone said.

"One possible explanation, according to previous literature, is that individuals have to understand themselves before they can understand others' situations and feel what others feel," Johnstone said. "So it's kind of like 'I need to experience what you're experiencing, and I can only do that if I have a strong sense of who I am.' If [individuals](#) don't have a strong sense of self, it's hard for them to know what the other person is going through or be able to feel it."

Empathy is a more complex process than the study conclusions suggest; the study provides a basis for future research on how self-orientation relates to empathy, Johnstone said.

"Functional and structural indices of empathy: Evidence for self-orientation as a neuropsychological foundation of empathy," was published this summer in *Neuropsychology*. MU co-authors from the College of Arts and Science included Dan Cohen, Bret Glass and Shawn Christ. Kirk Bryant, a postdoctoral fellow at West Virginia University, also contributed to the study.

More information: Brick Johnstone et al. Functional and structural

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