

Exploring empathy in everyday life

July 27 2021, by Tina Adamopoulos



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Researchers at the University of Toronto are studying our capacity for empathy, or our ability to sense and understand someone else's emotions, and are debunking some common misconceptions along the way.

Their work, recently published in the journal *Psychological Science*, is potentially important since empathy is fundamental to maintaining

meaningful and healthy relationships, making it a big part of our daily lives.

"We want to get a description of empathy by looking at it in everyday life, across different emotions and [social contexts](#)," says Greg Depow, a Ph.D. student who is studying [social psychology](#) at U of T Scarborough.

"We want to study empathy more in environments closer to how it is actually experienced in real life."

The study, which was co-authored with Professor Michael Inzlicht, looked at perceptions of empathy in 246 American adults. Depow says one goal of the research is to fill in gaps from previous work to offer a deeper, more authentic view of empathy. This was done by looking at who is more likely to be empathetic and how often we take the [opportunity](#) to empathize per day. The research also looked at how empathy impacts subjective well-being, which is the scientific term for happiness and sense of purpose in life.

Opportunities to empathize with others occur when one observes the emotions of another person or stranger. This can be done in person or even on social media—for example, when you notice a friend's emotional status or posts.

The researchers found that people will empathize when they recognize the opportunity to do so, but often notice other people's emotions without flagging them as opportunities to empathize.

"People were seeing these [emotional](#) experiences of other people, but weren't flagging them as opportunities to empathize," Depow says. "If you crunch the numbers a bit, it seems as though a third of emotions people see in daily life are not seen as empathy opportunities."

Learning what differentiates missed and flagged opportunities may be key to learning how to recognize and provide opportunities empathy more successfully, Depow says.

"One thing that I'm interested in is differentiating missed opportunities from the ones people are noticing. This is important because people may be missing opportunities to connect with others and promote happiness for both parties."

While previous studies have typically focused on how empathy is measured based on the suffering of strangers and its effects on the empathizer, it turns out people are three times more likely to empathize with [positive emotions](#) than negative ones.

"If I look just at negative emotions that people are empathizing with, that's actually associated with reduced subjective well-being," Depow says. "[But] because people are empathizing with positive emotions three times as often, overall empathy is associated with increased subjective well-being."

Who we empathize with is also an important factor. Most studies tend to focus on how people empathize with strangers, but Depow says the evidence shows that people are more likely to support those who are close to them.

He adds that confidence appears to affect our experience with empathy. People who are confident about their experiences seem to experience increased levels of well-being.

"People find empathy difficult more or less in different situations and that seems to change people's experience of empathy and the extent to which they empathize."

The researchers also found that receiving [empathy](#) ourselves may make us more receptive to empathizing with others. By contrast, those who empathized with others were no more or less likely to notice another opportunity to empathize with someone else.

More information: Gregory John Depow et al, The Experience of Empathy in Everyday Life, *Psychological Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797621995202](#)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Exploring empathy in everyday life (2021, July 27) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-07-exploring-empathy-everyday-life.html>

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