

The world needs more empathy—here is how science can harness it

November 28 2023, by Keila DePape



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In a world grappling with deep-seated division and social upheaval, empathy has become more critical than ever.

But science suggests when it comes to evoking empathy, our imagination is more powerful than we previously thought. A new study led by McGill

researchers reveals how the different ways to experience empathy affect our willingness to help others.

"Empathy is the ability to understand the situation of another person and is vital for [prosocial behaviors](#). However, we know that empathy isn't just one thing—we can experience it very differently, either as personal distress or compassionate concern for that other person," explains McGill psychology professor Signy Sheldon and the study's co-author.

Until now, research in empathy has largely focused on how imagining helping another person can promote compassion but not on how imagining another person's situation affects empathy, which is usually our first mental course of action.

These findings, published in the journal *Emotion*, break new ground by showing how another form of empathy, personal distress, is more prominent when imagining those situations and may actually be a catalyst for taking action to help.

The joint effort between McGill and Albany University discovered that when we vividly imagine someone else's problems in our minds, it makes us feel their pain more and motivates us to lend a helping hand.

The findings bring us closer to cracking the code of human behavior and the link between our mental experiences and prosocial actions. These results are essential for understanding why some situations and even people seem more empathetic than others.

Experimenting with empathy

If you hear your friend has lost a loved one or a neighbor's car was stolen, what happens in your mind? Do you take on the pain of your friend, or do you feel concern and compassion?

The research involved three online experiments where participants were asked to truly visualize themselves in another person's shoes.

"Our experiments revealed that when people simulated distressful scenarios of other individuals, they felt much more personal distress than when these scenarios were not simulated. Interestingly, we also found imagining these scenarios in such a way increased the willingness to help that individual," says Sheldon, Canada Research Chair in Cognitive Neuroscience of Memory.

As imagining others' situations is linked to [episodic memory](#), this discovery raises significant questions about the link between [memory capacity](#) and [empathy](#), which is an important avenue for further research.

More information: Amy J. P. Gregory et al, From memory to motivation: Probing the relationship between episodic simulation, empathy, and helping intentions., *Emotion* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0001294](#)

Provided by McGill University

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