

# How we think about our past experiences affects how we can help others

19 July 2017, by Adam Gerace



We're less able to understand others if we ruminate on our own problems. Credit: ???/Unsplash, CC BY-SA

Have you ever told a friend experiencing a troubling situation "I know *exactly* how you feel"?

This empathic response is usually driven by a connection we've made with our own similar experiences. Having "been there", we believe we know what it's like to be them. But do we really?

During his presidency, Barack Obama often [spoke](#) of the ability to "recognise ourselves in each other". Much earlier, Oliver Wendell Holmes [wrote](#) in 1859:

"A moment's insight is sometimes worth a life's experience."

Both quotes reflect themes psychologists have grappled with for much of the discipline's existence. That is, how we come to understand and process challenging experiences such as relationship breakdowns, loss of loved ones or interpersonal conflicts, and to what extent we can use these experiences to [understand others going through similar things](#).

In order to address these issues, we need to consider the ways we think about ourselves ("self-

reflection") and the ways we think about others ("perspective taking").

## How do we understand others?

Self-reflection is turning our attention inward to consider what we are feeling at a given moment, why we acted in such a way, and how our past experiences have shaped us. Surprisingly, we don't reflect on inner experiences as often as might be expected, with our environment usually the focus of attention.

Perspective taking allows us to consider what it's like to be in someone else's situation and to empathise with their experiences. We do this every day, such as when we predict how a [driver](#) in the next lane with a different field of vision will behave, or when we console a friend who is discussing their misfortunes.

One of the main ways we try to understand another person's experiences is to [imagine ourselves in their place](#) and to use our experiences of love and loss to connect with their situation. This process has a [neurological basis](#): brain regions activated when we focus on our own point of view are also activated when considering that of another person.

Reflecting on a similar situation we've experienced makes it [easier to understand another person](#) and can result in [compassion for their plight](#). But sometimes we are actually less [compassionate](#) or willing to [help](#) them, particularly if we are currently experiencing a similar situation.

## How we can understand them better

Researchers believe we [reflect on ourselves](#) in two different ways – one out of curiosity and wanting to know more about what makes us tick ("intellectual self-attentiveness"), and the other is ruminating on our experiences – driven by anxieties and fears of loss.

Rumination involves replaying an event again and again, often with little awareness of why it occurred. While more positive self-reflection or attentiveness is associated with an [increased tendency](#) to consider other peoples' points of view, being prone to rumination makes us less able to consider things from other people's perspectives.

The more a person ruminates, the more they experience [personal distress](#), making them less able to connect with another's misfortunes.

Initially, it's normal to play over in our minds negative events such as a marriage breakdown or loss of a loved one. But we can [become](#) fixated on these experiences, which is associated with [depression and anxiety](#). For our experiences to help us connect with others, we need to move beyond rumination to developing insight (understanding) into what has occurred.

The [ways](#) we think about past experiences can help or hinder the development of insight. One way is to mentally immerse ourselves in our past experiences – as if we were right back there – focusing on what occurred. This is likely to bring the past to life, but also results in anger and attributing blame to others involved.

By contrast, a self-distanced perspective, where we almost picture the situation as a "[fly on the wall](#)" leads to focusing on why an experience occurred, which can foster insight and closure.

[Studies have found](#) when people can reflect on their own problems with a bit of distance and compassion for themselves, they're able to see the "bigger picture". This in turn makes them better able to consider their own and others' needs, and more likely to forgive and help others.

### **We can never know 'exactly' how someone feels**

Self-reflection is essential for understanding our troubling experiences. In turn, this understanding is likely to help us consider others in similar situations.

We can't assume others will experience a situation exactly the way we did, as there are probably

[differences](#) in the [experiences](#). It can also be [difficult](#) to imagine ourselves back in an emotionally-charged time in our lives. In certain contexts, especially working as a [psychologist or nurse](#), taking another person's perspective in a more distant way is advised.

Perhaps, then, rather than telling someone "I know *exactly* how you feel", it's best to ask curious questions that will help you to clarify what they are going through, as well as help them develop insight into their situation.

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