

Podcast #19 -Empathy and Trauma-Podcast -(8 Minutes)

Today I want to talk about empathy. Sympathy and empathy are different. Sympathy is when you understand that someone else is suffering. Empathy is when you also feel that person's suffering.

Empathy is hardwired and begins in the mirroring that goes on between an infant and a caretaker, playful imitation through facial expressions and gestures, through mutual cooing and mimicking each other's emotional states. The capacity for empathy is innate and grounded in neurobiological processes and brain chemicals such as oxytocin and endogenous opiates. It makes use of what are called "mirror neurons". But this is important now: Healthy empathy doesn't just mean feeling like another person, or identifying completely with another person. As the infant matures, he or she develops the capacity to differentiate self from other, thereby grasping the crucial fact that one's own thoughts and feelings are not necessarily shared by everyone else. Feeling and seeing the world from another's perspective, while appreciating that others may be as

different and unique as you, are the two components of mature empathy.

As is so often true in psychological development---If we receive empathy, our capacity to then feel and express it with others grows. We become social beings. The empathy we experience from our most important caretakers makes us feel safe and better able to develop our cognitive abilities and our moral sensibilities. Healthy parental empathy makes a child feel safe and able to develop self-esteem and autonomy.

But what happens when all of this breaks down? Human beings who are deprived of empathic social surroundings don't feel safe. The world is threatening. When the world is threatening, the psyche and brain go into a fight or flight state. They resort to using more primitive brain circuitry—we call this the “reptilian brain” --to deal with adversity. When empathy breaks down or is absent, the systems that help us comfort and regulate ourselves, to master stress, become overwhelmed.

The result? Well, we call that trauma.

We usually think of trauma as what happens when a big horrible thing happens, you know, like when a military convoy gets hit with an IED or there's an earthquake or one or both of our parents are physically violent and/or abusive. But the psychological feelings of danger that are at the heart of trauma are more often due to subtler failures of empathy.

Evidence of early trauma due to the breakdown of empathy can be seen in experiments conducted in the late 1970s, in which mothers were filmed playing with their babies, both parties enjoying the ordinary mirroring of gesture and expression so typical of those early days. The mothers were then instructed to make their faces flat, still, and unresponsive to their babies, for three minutes.

The babies quickly became agitated, confused, and desperate. They broke down, expressing rage, protest and grief. Eventually they gave up and turned away from their mothers, sad and hopeless. However temporarily, this qualified as trauma. Now, imagine a parent chronically unable to properly mirror a child's gestures and feelings....multiply the above example 1000 times. The trauma that results is usually profound.

Among other things, when empathy breaks down, the developing child doesn't learn how to manage stress, how to soothe him or herself. Various disturbances are then often seen. For example, these infants might grow up to become teenagers and adults who depend on drugs or alcohol to calm down. They may become hyperactive. They may even shut down and numb themselves, having great difficulty empathizing with others, including their own children.

We could say, then, that proper mirroring, proper empathy goes into the development of a health stress-response system. No empathy? Well, more difficulty managing stress. But here's another important takeaway from the studies of empathy and stress. While in the beginning this system depends entirely on the child's most intimate caretakers, the need for mirroring and recognition never goes away. Empathy continues to be a vital nutrient throughout the life cycle. And this shouldn't be a news flash to anyone, right? The need to be understood, to have someone empathize with us, while recognizing the ways

that we're special, is universal and we can all easily see it in ourselves and others. Empathy is like food for the soul.

Unfortunately, too often in our society, people are isolated and deprived of this nourishment. Household size has shrunk. The average number of confidantes that people have has sharply decreased over the last few decades, with a full quarter of Americans reporting that they have no confidantes at all.

Time spent socializing with friends or having family dinners has similarly declined. The last five decades have witnessed stunning declines in virtually every form of social and civic participation, spaces where people can encounter each other face to face in their communities, including churchgoing events, social clubs, the PTA, and even, according to sociologist Robert Putnam, bowling leagues.

The number of hours that children spend playing outside in unstructured activities — necessary for the development of social skills and empathy — was reduced by 50 percent between 1981 and 1997, a loss compensated for by radical increases in time spent watching television or sitting in front of computer screens. On average, American kids watch two

to four hours of television daily. And consider this: 43 percent of children under 2 years old watch television or videos every day.

Children need face-to-face human interaction and digital substitutes just won't do. On nearly all measures of social life, Americans tend to have fewer and lower quality interactions with one another than their parents or grandparents did. Furthermore, isolation has grown along with inequality. They go together.

It turns out, not surprisingly, that societies with more economic fairness and equality are ones that encourage and privilege cooperation and mutuality. Societies like ours that are so exceptionally unequal encourage and privilege aggression, paranoia, and competitiveness, traits associated with the so-called "rugged individualist." While sometimes adaptive, such an ideal also makes a virtue out of disconnection and trauma. Empathy is under siege in our society. It needs to be supported and strengthened.

Understanding the powerful value of empathy and the risks of its absence should make us more supportive of families, encourage more play, fight against inequality, and

build communities that embed our individualism in a much richer — and more empathic — social world.