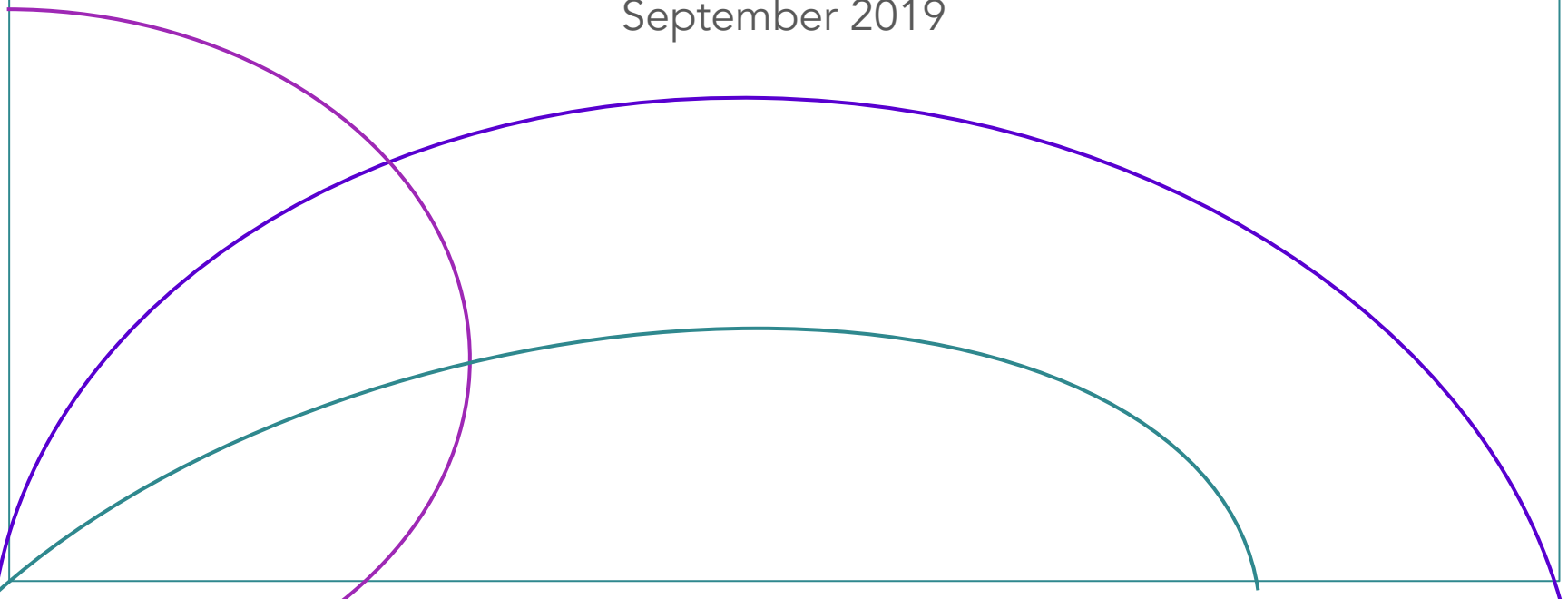




# Empathy

**An Invaluable Natural Resource for  
Peace**

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# Empathy: An Invaluable Natural Resource for Peace

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# Empathy for Peace

*Empathy for Peace* is dedicated to building fair, just and peaceful communities. We do this by sharing cross-disciplinary empathy science with people and organizations working to create a more peaceful world.

Specifically, we support community groups, and peace organizations and challenge them to leverage empathy research to build evidence-based approaches to conflict resolution, peace-building, and reconciliation processes. Through this, we create opportunities for practical evidence-based projects with real-world applications and impact.

*Empathy for Peace* is a Canadian-registered volunteer operated charity founded in 2015 by a group of empathy research scientists and peace-building practitioners, from Palestine, Israel, Europe, Canada, and the US.

*Empathy for Peace* seeks to raise awareness of the importance of empathy for building healthier safer societies with improved wellbeing, and encouraging empathy to reduce conflict in regions such as the Middle East.

*Empathy for Peace* held a conference in 2016 in the British Academy in London, participated in the United Nations seminar on Palestine in 2017, and held a conference in Rome in 2017, bringing grassroots peace-building groups together with academics to explore how best to harness empathy to produce positive social change and create peaceful communities. In 2019 and 2020, we plan to hold empathy workshops aimed at different professional groups to help them disseminate empathic practice and tools for fostering empathy in their peace-building work.

For more information visit our website <https://www.empathy-for-peace.org/>

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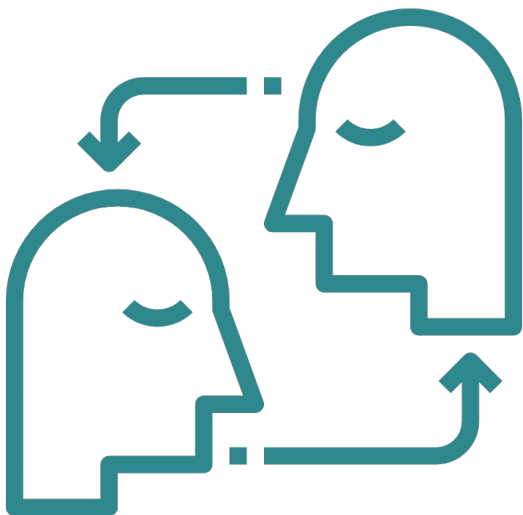
# Introduction

Empathy is an invaluable natural resource for conflict transformation. With empathy, we can build a better society because empathy enables human beings to appreciate other people's perspective and respond to other people's thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion. Empathy serves as an inhibitor of aggression and conflict, a catalyst of prosocial behavior, and has the potential to build sustainable peace between communities in conflict.

This paper discusses some key factors that contribute to empathy in order to better understand its important role in conflict transformation and peace building.

## What is Empathy?

Empathy is the ability to recognize other people's thoughts and feelings ("cognitive empathy") and respond to these with an appropriate emotion ("affective empathy")<sup>1</sup>.



## What makes us less empathic?

A number of factors have been identified by scientific research that can reduce how much empathy a person may have.

These include social factors such as:

- 1) Obedience to authority<sup>2</sup>, where people may act in cruel ways because they are "just following orders";
- 2) Ideology<sup>3,4</sup>, where people may hurt others because they are in the grip of a strong belief system that they are morally right;
- 3) In-group/out-group relations<sup>5,6</sup>, where a group might collectively hold a rigid belief<sup>4</sup> that one's own group (the in-group) is superior to another person's group (the out-group), and which, in extreme cases, can lead us to dehumanize members of the other group;
- 4) Early neglect and abuse<sup>7</sup>, where one might grow up feeling that others do not care for you so you do not need to care for others; and
- 5) Trauma<sup>8</sup>, where if you feel under threat, or are actually under threat, you may not be able to empathize with others because all you can do is think about how to protect yourself and your loved ones.

These also include biological factors such as:

- 1) Genetics<sup>9</sup>, where there may be genes that affect brain function to lead some individuals to have difficulties with empathy; and
- 2) Hormones (like testosterone and oxytocin)<sup>10,11</sup>, which may affect how easily one can empathize.

# How can we foster greater empathy as a natural resource?

Understanding the intrinsic factors that can cause an erosion of empathy are important in order to consider how to enhance the potential for empathy in mitigating and/or transforming conflicts.

## Inter-group relations

Research<sup>12-14</sup> shows that between communities in conflict, intergroup interaction reduces fear of others, reduces the risk of dehumanizing the other, and diffuses tension between the conflicting groups, optimally when the following three conditions are met:

- 1) both groups have equal status in the interaction environment;
- 2) the groups work towards a common goal; and
- 3) the intergroup contact is sanctioned by some authority.

But even in the event that these interactions do not amount to empathy, at a minimum, they often lead to in-group censoring of hostility and provocations against out-group members.

In contrast, other social factors can increase conflict, such as authority and/or institutional disapproval of inter-group interactions. However, the effect of such disapproval can be mitigated through different means<sup>15</sup>, for example:

- 1) by ensuring that these interactions are recurrent and long-term;
- 2) by giving out-group members a voice in the in-group literature, art and film, because they can represent an authoritative voice within the culture;
- 3) by having more integrated schools, because they allow for a day-to-day interaction between in-group and out-group members who may not otherwise see each other in their community;
- 4) by mobilizing institutions to engage more members of both groups in terms of collaborative projects, as well as in terms of increasing the representation of out-group members within institutions; and
- 5) by challenging laws and practices that promote segregation, because segregation can lead to the erosion of empathy.



# How can we foster greater empathy as a natural resource?

## Power Dynamics

The dynamics between groups in conflict are often driven by the way power operates between them, such as those in the context of an occupier and an occupied. Power considerations (i.e., maintaining the status quo of asymmetric control over resources) may lead to a perpetuation of the conflict. Moreover, receiving concessions from the weaker party can promote and sustain the dominance of the party in power, as this may be perceived as acceptance of the status quo. And when the party in power makes a concession or dependency oriented help, it may actually do so in order to establish or exert its dominance over the weaker party<sup>16</sup>. Accordingly, in order for empathy to be effective and bidirectional, the power differential needs to be addressed. Bridging such a power differential in terms of military and economic means is challenging but a number of approaches can be utilized to facilitate the transformation of the conflict:

- ❖ *Truth and reconciliation*: One way to enhance empathy is via truth and reconciliation efforts<sup>17</sup>. This has been effective in post-conflict settings, for example, in post-apartheid South Africa. However, these efforts can entail narratives that are difficult to talk about and can be highly culturally specific. Moreover, depending on how the information is conveyed, members of the groups in conflict process conflict-relevant information differently. Empathy research can provide guidance<sup>18-20</sup> on how the discussion of these narratives can be framed to be productive. Finding common ground such as being bound by the grief of losing a loved one can transform animosities into friendship. Empathy research on the identification of such “*points of entry*” is urgently needed.
- ❖ *Constraints to liberty*: Liberty is a universal human right, and conflict places extremely limiting factors on the extent to which some civilians feel free. The imposition of constraints on the liberty of others can lead to the erosion of empathy. The removal of such constraints by the party in power may reverse such erosion<sup>21</sup>.
- ❖ *Dimensions of power sharing*: The identification of areas or domains where power can be shared among the conflicting groups is an important platform for fostering empathy as the groups work together to achieve a resolution. Power sharing can also act as a sustaining force of stability post conflict<sup>22</sup>.
- ❖ *Building a culture of peacemakers*: Studies have found that empathy in children is highly connected to the way they are parented and the level of peace and stability of their homes and communities<sup>7</sup>. Raising our children with empathy not only ensures peace at home but also lays the foundation for just and peaceful communities locally and around the world.

**The power of empathy does not just lie in its potential to transform conflicts, but also in its potential to prevent conflict from happening. Just as empathy can be eroded, it can also be enhanced.**



# Empathy Monitoring

Currently, no means are available to measure empathy at a global (i.e., community, regional, state) level. We see this as a priority research area. One direction would be to leverage demographic, economic and socio-political variables known to predict empathy towards out-group members. These include variables associated with degree of segregation within communities, cross-group employment, representation of out-group members in all sectors, and in positions of power or influence. One benefit of such monitoring system is the mobilization and allocation of resources to foster empathy in a targeted and specific way.

## Concluding Remarks

Empathy begins with being aware of the other's perspective but must also include a drive to want to alleviate the pain of others. We are now aware of factors that can promote or reduce empathy and we need to increase efforts for the former, particularly in areas of conflict. Our premise is that we all have empathy and empathy can be fostered or discouraged by parents, teachers, and other agencies of society. How caring our society ends up depends importantly on whether empathy is enabled to grow and blossom, in children, and in all of us.





# Empathy: An Invaluable Natural Resource for Peace

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