

Double Empathy Problem Fact Sheet

What is empathy and how does it relate to autism?

Empathy is the ability to understand and relate to other people's feelings. Many people wrongly believe that all autistic individuals are incapable of demonstrating empathy. There are two types of empathy: cognitive empathy (the ability to work out what a person is thinking or feeling) and affective empathy (the ability to respond to someone's emotional state in the 'expected' manner e.g. by comforting someone who is crying). Some research suggests that autistic individuals have deficits in cognitive empathy, but not affective empathy, but the findings are inconsistent. One of the reasons for this inconsistency is that each autistic individual has different strengths and support needs. Research suggests that the ability to show empathy is not consistent across autistic individuals, meaning that autistic people have different capacities for empathy. Moreover, some autistic individuals have very high levels of empathy, and are more empathetic than non-autistic people, highlighting why believing all autistic people have deficits in empathy is incorrect and can be damaging.

What is the Double Empathy Problem?

The term 'Double Empathy Problem' was coined by Damian Milton in the early 2010s. Milton explained that autistic people experience the world differently to non-autistic individuals, which leads to autistic individuals struggling to understand the perspectives of non-autistic individuals. However, Milton also explained that non-autistic individuals struggle to understand the perspectives of autistic individuals due to these differing experiences. Therefore, Milton's argument is that non-autistic individuals have a lack of understanding and empathy for autistic individuals and vice versa. Milton's argument is important because it goes against the narrative that the responsibility to change should be on autistic individuals by highlighting that non-autistic individuals also have deficits in empathy.

How can non-autistic people be more empathetic to autistic people?

It is important that non-autistic people think about how they can be more empathetic to autistic people, as the Double Empathy Problem, suggests that empathy is a two-way street.

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To be more empathetic to autistic people, you could:

- Avoid making assumptions about someone's needs and capabilities based on stereotypes of autism.
- Get to know the autistic people you interact with on a deeper level. Don't make autistic individuals feel like it is their responsibility to educate you on autism as a whole but be mindful of what their individual preferences are.
- Use neuro-affirming language and practices.
- Avoid practices which try to change the autistic individual and make them feel like they need to improve to be more neurotypical. Show that you accept the individual for who they are.
- Avoid dissuading individuals from self-regulatory behaviours such as stimming
- Be willing to listen and learn. Apologise if you get it wrong, and don't see autistic people advocating for themselves as an attack.
- Educate yourself on autism by reading books, listening to podcasts and watching videos from as many different autistic creators who have different perspectives.
- Be an ally by calling out discriminatory practices or bullying when you see them.

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