CAN YOU
People who previously endured challenges were less likely to show compassion for someone struggling with the same challenge.

Imagine that you have just become a new parent. Overwhelmed and exhausted, your performance at work is suffering. You desperately want to work from home part-time to devote more attention to your family. One of your supervisors had children while climbing the corporate ladder, while the other hasn’t. Which supervisor is more likely to embrace your request?

Most people would recommend approaching the supervisor who has children, drawing on the intuition that shared experience breeds empathy. After all, she has “been there” and thus seems best placed to understand your situation.

Our recent research suggests that this instinct is very often wrong.

In a series of recent experiments, we found that people who endured challenges in the past (like divorce or being skipped over for a promotion) were less likely to show compassion for someone facing the same struggle, compared with people with no experience in that particular situation.

People who have endured a difficult experience are particularly likely to penalize those who struggle to cope with a similar ordeal.

But why does this occur? We suggest that this phenomenon is rooted in two psychological truths.

First, people generally have difficulty accurately recalling just how difficult a past aversive experience was. Though we may remember that a past experience was painful, stressful, or emotionally trying, we tend to underestimate just how painful that experience felt in the moment. This phenomenon is called an “empathy gap.”

Second, people who have previously overcome an aversive experience know that they were able to successfully overcome it, which makes them feel especially confident about their understanding of just how difficult the situation is. The combined experience of “I can’t recall how difficult it was” and “I know that I got through it myself” creates the perception that the event can be readily conquered, reducing empathy toward others struggling with the event.

From Whom Do We Seek Help?

This finding seems to run counter to our intuitions. When we asked participants to predict who would show the most
Who Would Show the Most Compassion?

This is Tommy. He is bullied at school by a group of other boys. One day he lashes out violently at one of his bullies, sending them both to the hospital.

Who would show more compassion for Tommy: a teacher who was also bullied as a child, or a teacher who wasn’t?

Compassion in the Workplace and Beyond

This clearly has implications for peer-to-peer office communication (choose the person you vent to carefully). And mentorship programs, which often pair people from similar backgrounds or experiences, may need to be reexamined. But there are also important lessons for leaders. When approached by employees in distress, leaders may believe that their own emotional reaction to the issue should guide their response. For example, an executive who broke the glass ceiling may focus on her own success when considering an employee’s concerns about discrimination. Similarly, managers in overworked industries such as consulting and banking may respond to employees’ concerns about burnout and fatigue with comments such as, “I had to work those hours, so why are you complaining?” (And in fact, there is some evidence that this mechanism is at play when older workers push back on reforms designed to help cut down on overwork.)

Simply put, leaders need to get outside of their own heads—to place less emphasis, not more, on their own past challenges. To bridge the empathy gap, leaders may be best served by focusing on how upset the other person seems to be, or to remind themselves that many others struggle with the same challenge.

Returning to the opening example, the supervisor approached by an exhausted new parent could instead think about the countless other new parents who struggle to find work-life balance, many of whom are ultimately pushed out of the workplace.

When we’re trying to encourage someone to be more empathetic, we often say something like “Walk a mile in his shoes.” As it turns out, that may be exactly the wrong thing to say to people who have worn those shoes themselves.

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