



CAN YOU



EMPATHIZE?

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endured challenges were less
likely to show compassion for
someone struggling with the
same challenge**

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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.

The Studies

In the first experiment, we surveyed people participating in a “polar plunge” – a jump into a very icy Lake Michigan in March. All participants read a story about a man named Pat who intended to complete the plunge, but chickened out and withdrew from the event at the last minute. Critically, participants read about Pat either before they had completed the plunge themselves, or one week after. We found that polar plungers who had successfully completed the plunge were less compassionate and more contemptuous of Pat than were those who had not yet completed the plunge.

In another study, we looked at compassion toward an individual struggling with unemployment. More than 200 people read a story about a man who—despite his best efforts—is unable to find a job. Struggling to make ends meet, the man ultimately stoops to selling drugs in order to earn money. The results: people who had overcome a period of unemployment in the past were less compassionate and more

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judgmental of the man than were people who were currently unemployed or had never been involuntarily unemployed.

A third study examined compassion toward a bullied teenager. Participants were either told that the teen was successfully coping with the bullying, or failed to cope by lashing out violently. Compared to participants who had no experience with bullying, participants who reported having been bullied in the past themselves were more compassionate toward the teen who was appropriately coping with the experience. But, similar to our earlier studies, participants who were bullied in the past were the least compassionate toward the teen who failed to successfully cope with the bullying.

Taken together, these results suggest that 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 for the bullied teenager, for instance—either a teacher who'd endured bullying himself, or one who never had—an overwhelming 99 out of the 112 people chose the teacher who had been bullied. This means that many people may be instinctively seeking compassion from the very people who are least likely to provide it.

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 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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