



Capacity for Empathy

So lets start with where this term came from. I was having similar conversations with clients around understanding a situation or feeling that felt difficult, challenging or uncomfortable. What I was seeing in these multiple conversations was a pattern; a pattern being we all have the ability to be patient, understanding and considerate, however some people can be really thoughtful and you can feel heard and listened to then suddenly they don't! It's as if a cold draught has blown in and blown at the fire. This is someone reaching their capacity.

“The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy, we can all sense a mysterious connection to each other.”
Meryl Streep

Now taking a step back lets get a clear definition of empathy and why it's so important. The definition of empathy I like is the ability to fully understand another persons experience. The metaphor regularly used is to walk in another man's shoes. Empathy is an innate human trait, as we are social beings, so it is important for us to understand how the same experience can be different for another person. How we empathise is on a spectrum, as a qualified and accredited counsellor I have studies and practised 100's of hours in advanced empathy to support my clients in building their self-awareness and responding to experiences rather than reacting. There is an element of skill to empathy where we might need to learn how to use it again if it has not been modelled effectively to us.

How do we do it?

In order for us to sit in another persons experience fully we need to have relative safety in our own experience. A great example of this is being hungover (If you've never been hungover then perhaps you don't need this wisdom) in that moment of

being hungover every experience is more challenging, our senses are overloaded, a communication skills are challenged and our focus is very much on our immediate experience of discomfort. In this moment our patience, compassion and resilience are all compromised. In this example you have reached your capacity, there is no to very little room to sit with another person's experience. Other people are not getting you at 'your best'.

And this is where self-care comes in, we need to address our own needs to be present with others. As the old saying goes; put your own oxygen mask on first before helping others with theirs. Self care in this example of capacity for empathy makes space or to put it in another way, if our capacity for empathy is a cup, self-care empties the cup giving us more emotional space to hold others and be present. And on the other side, stress fills our cup up.

The journey of self development

Self-development (for example working on ourselves through the 4 pillars of wellbeing: Physical, Emotional, Social and Spiritual) gives us opportunity to expand our capacity. Deep therapeutic work gives us opportunity to remove blocks to empathy, things that fill up our cup and don't go away with self-care.

So a way to visualise this is we are all walking around with a coffee cup and some interactions help us to empty our cup this could be a compliment, or doing something fun, it could be the extra freedom today that you booked a day off, or it could be the satisfaction of completing a task and feeling fulfilled. Then there are those experiences which add to our cup, stress, sadness and stuck-ness. This could be experiences where it requires a higher level of empathy than we have available to offer and in return we can get stuck in a feeling. Coaching helps us explore these interactions and see through the beliefs and stories. Resulting in more capacity for yourself and others.

“If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from his angle as well as your own.”

Henry Ford

If it goes unchecked our cup can fill up quickly, an argument here, a passive aggressive email there, traffic on the way home and we are at capacity, no more responding to situations but a reaction. This is why we don't also get others at their best, they are experiencing stress, sadness, stuck-ness and in this place their capacity for empathy is full. And this is where this concept is powerful, when you can see that everyone has the capacity for empathy and in their experiences that impact their ability to show up to you with compassion, kindness and politeness we can see they

are doing the best they can, with the tools they've got. Put another way they are functioning in that situation with all they have available to them.

Let's ask the question we should have started with:

Why do I want to consider this concept? What is the benefit to you, considering other peoples capacity for empathy?

Well short answer is we can live a life of fun, freedom and fulfilment when we are not holding on to problems. Put another way we can live a life of less stress, sadness and stuck-ness.

To build on this answer, when we understand we are all out here navigating this world to the best of our abilities we can lean into the fact that when we see someone in a reactive state (uncompassionate, hostile, irritable) they have reached their capacity and in turn we can respond instead of react. It's a tool that helps us see what is really happening rather than what we might have felt was happening in the moment. As an additional bonus, when we work on our capacity for empathy and can be more present with those around us, they can have the space to grow and increase their capacity for empathy.

Happy exploring! If you would like to explore this further or discuss any of the topics I mentioned then I invite you to reach out here:

[Book A Call](#)

contact@ashleycrocker.co.uk

www.ashleycrocker.co.uk