

Autism & Empathy

By “D”

A few years ago, when I was working in Mississauga, Ontario, I went to pick up a sandwich for lunch the next day. Outside a man lay face down on the pavement. I asked the Subway Restaurant staff why he was there. They said they didn't know but he had been there for two hours. I immediately went outside and lifted his hood. He appeared to be a senior citizen or at least a person who had lived a rough life.

I asked him twice if he wanted me to call 9-1-1 and twice, he answered yes.

The events recounted above were true, and the most amazing part was that this didn't happen out in the woods. It happened in the middle of a strip mall. Many people were around. Why was I the first one to summon help?

One of the biggest complaints neurotypicals have against Autists is that we are stereotyped to lack empathy. Tests show that autistic individuals, including myself, can often have a degree of impairment in the ability to recognize facial emotion compared to neurotypicals of an equivalent level of visual acuity. We often rate lower than expected in levels of sympathy for pictures of people in distress.

These facts can lead many people to conflate autism with conduct disorder or antisocial personality disorder – problems strongly linked by the mass media with criminality. In fact, these are mental disorders that are not the same as being a criminal or certainly not the same as being autistic.

The fact that so many in this society do not know the difference between mental disease and crime bodes poorly for the press and the education system. It illustrates just how stigmatized mental illness is.

Empathy is a spectrum.

Everyone has their own place on that spectrum which may shift over our lifetimes. It is also not a one-dimensional spectrum. Some people feel more empathy for one type of person or situation while someone else might for another. Empathy is not a choice – it *just happens* or *just doesn't happen*.

When I was in kindergarten our class tried to hatch chicken eggs. One of them didn't hatch and I cried. I was the only student to do so. This led my teacher to conclude I was hyper-empathetic. Later in life when I was late for a doctor's appointment because I had problems with my executive functioning the doctor diagnosed me as having impaired empathy because I didn't respect his time. My disability caseworker once concluded that the fact I wanted more money from their program was proof that I lacked empathy for the taxpayer. Before the US civil war abolitionists were accused of lacking empathy for the slave owners they wished to deprive of property. One person was even executed for treason for this very reason!

In my experience, autistic people lack empathy for neurotypicals and neurotypicals for autists.

It seems it's easier to empathize with those similar to you. Since the neurotypical is the majority, their perspective is universalized. In fact, these two groups can empathize—with work. Some autistics have married neurotypicals and I shudder to think how difficult such a relationship must be for both parties. Nevertheless, they loved one another enough to try.

In closing, empathy is not a choice. Lack of empathy is not the same as being a criminal or being autistic. It's an experience that varies from person to person, and from situation to situation. It's time we started looking at it as a unique gift that can make us shine under the right circumstance, rather than a cookie-cutter to which evil people cannot conform.

About the author

“D” is one of Autism Canada's newest Autism Ambassadors and Newsletter Contributors. We would like to take this opportunity to welcome D to our team and we look forward to sharing D's perspectives with our community.