

THE GO-GETTER THRIVE GUIDE

Empathy Re-Examined

by Recalibrate



WELCOME FROM OUR FOUNDER

Welcome to Recalibrate's Go-Getter Thrive Guide, our new, monthly resource curated to help busy professionals mentally thrive with expert insights, clever tips, and seamless tools. Our theme this issue is "Empathy Re-Examined", aiming to myth-bust and distill the most critical practices of empathy, often misunderstood, with a goal of helping us reconnect as humans amidst a year of stress, anxiety, and dissent.

First, I'll share my top misconceptions and re-examinations of empathy. Then, guest contributor and psychologist, Tori Olds, PhD shares research revealing the emerging importance of group IQ and empathy in workplaces. We have our first of many future "Emotional Vocabulary" entries to define fear, a feeling often overlooked but rescued when empathy reaches out. And finally, Recalibrate's wonderful Lisa Keefauver, MSW has recorded a five-minute guided meditation on empathy that you can take as your mental love tap for the day.

Our team can't wait for you to read, reflect, and share feedback. I'm sending warmth to each of you and as always -- cheers to healthy minds, y'all!



Gloria Chan Packer



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TOP OF MIND

By Gloria Chan Packer | *Recalibrate*

Four years ago, I found myself as the youngest Engagement Manager at the management consulting firm I used to work for (and still love – hi, y’all!). Part of my working reputation was being a leader who could take on some of our most challenging projects and demanding client executives. After navigating such pressure cooker situations successfully, I’d have peers, colleagues, and even clients ask, “What’s your secret sauce?” My answer was always, in addition to traditional hard skills, that I believed empathy was the secret sauce that empowered my effectiveness, helping transform even the most emotional client disagreements into common understanding that would reveal a productive solution. “Empathy, huh?” At the sound of such a soft-feeling word for such a hardcore-feeling work environment, many eyebrows would furrow with skepticism before changing topics.

Then, and now, I think empathy is often misperceived and underrated. Our year so far has been boiling over with uncertainty, polarization, and anxiety, which we’ve all been feeling the impact of. Now, empathy is a critical tool. Where conflict breaks, empathy can bridge, transforming dissent into connection, bias into shared human experience, and repairing relationships that enrich our lives inside and outside of work. Below, I offer my top five misconceptions and re-examinations of empathy to help you thrive inside and outside of work.



1. Empathy is not projecting. Empathy asks before it tells.

Although empathy includes imagining what someone else is feeling, it does not stop there. When we stop with just imagining, we are often unintentionally projecting our own experiences onto others, making assumptions that can often be inaccurate or feel invalidating. Think back to the last time you felt one way and someone approached you saying “I know you’re feeling _____” but was way off base with their prediction – you may have felt disconnected, maybe even offended, and end up not listening as well to the other person even despite their likely good intent. To practice empathy well, we need to remember to ask and listen, so that we can learn new information that helps us better understand the different lived experiences and perspectives of others. When we practice empathy in this way, even amidst conflict, we can establish common ground while better connecting with what makes us individualistic and similar as humans. So, remember: Empathy is not projecting. Empathy asks before it tells.

In practice: The next time you sense interpersonal tension and start wondering what your coworker, partner, or roommate are feeling – before launching into predictions of what might be wrong or even asking “What’s wrong?” – take a breath and try out a “Hey, I sense some tension; is that just me? How are you feeling?”

**"Where conflict breaks,
empathy can bridge."**

2. Empathy is not sympathy.

Empathy is understanding another person’s feelings and perspective. Sympathy is feeling sorrow or pity for another person’s hardships or misfortune. Quoting Brené Brown, “Empathy fuels connection. Sympathy drives disconnection.” Although the intent of sympathy is good, it’s often disconnecting because it implies a power dynamic or welfare differential. Empathy, on the other hand, establishes common ground that fosters shared, human connection.

In practice: If a coworker makes a misstep in a meeting or presentation – instead of practicing sympathy by feeling bad for them and avoiding the subject, or giving unsolicited advice – try practicing empathy by reaching out, asking how they’re doing, recognizing what they’re feeling is understandable, and asking if you can do anything to help.

3. Empathy is not a bonus skill.

Empathy is critical to great leadership and collective change.

The greatest leaders are not only great leaders of work but great leaders of people, which requires giving people the space to feel seen, heard, and understood. Empathy is critical to leading people well, especially when differences create a conflict, triggering defensive emotions that often get in the way of establishing productive, inclusive solutions for collective change. When conflict disconnects, empathy repairs, bridging differences in understanding, identifying common ground, and producing solutions for progress – a critical ability that sets changemaking leaders apart from the rest.

In practice: When you feel annoyed or offended by someone's behavior, instead of launching into predictions of their ill-intent or lack-of-XYZ, take a deep breath, and try asking, "I wonder what they have or haven't experienced that would cause them to behave in this way?" (And also, see next note about boundaries)

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4. Empathy requires boundaries.

Empathy without boundaries is at best, a little people-pleasing and at worst, codependency and self-betrayal. Empathy isn't for enabling bad behavior or disrespect but rather, for reconnecting across differences to enable learning and progress. Practicing empathy doesn't mean you have to give up on your beliefs, but that you practice hearing new perspectives with an open mind. Sometimes, that can happen with emotional regulation and respect – but sometimes it can't, and in those moments, boundaries come first.

In practice: Before engaging in empathetic asking, check in with yourself to ensure you have the emotional regulation and mental space to hear what will be shared with curiosity, an open mind, and without judgment. As the conversation occurs, check in to ensure you feel within bounds of your integrity and dignity and if not, express what boundaries you need. (E.g., "I want to understand your perspective, but in order to feel respected, I need you to stop calling this silly.")

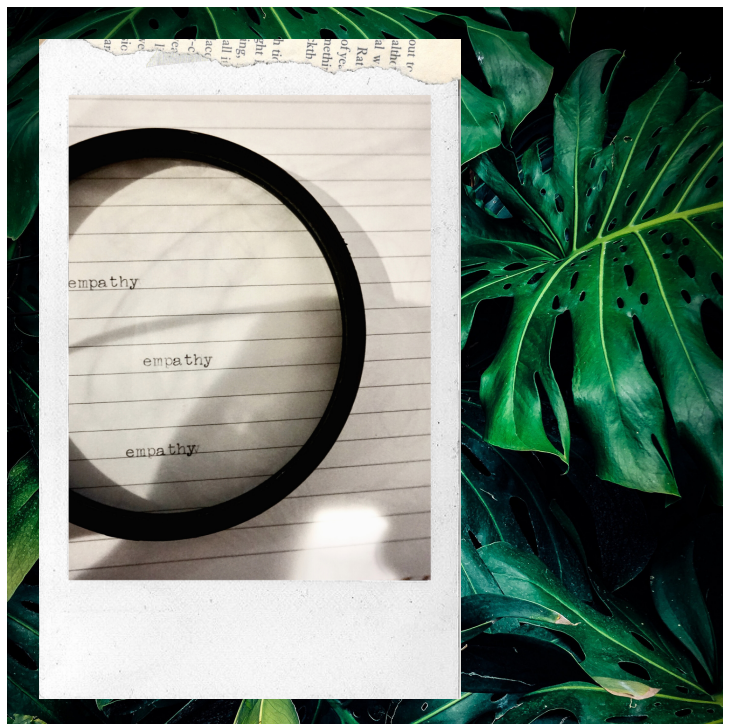
5. Empathy is not easy.

It requires discomfort, practice, and grit.

I think a lot of times, because empathy is a soft skill that we associate with kindness, we perceive that you either have it or you don't – and that people who practice empathy were born with it and it comes naturally to them. In my experience, that couldn't be farther from the truth. It's not comfortable or easy to pause in a moment of self-defense to try to reconnect with the human across from you. It requires constant self-awareness, rational-emotional balance, and resilience. Things that are worthwhile rarely come easy and we need to recognize the work required for empathy before we'll start to reap its rich rewards.

To keep us supported along the difficult yet rewarding path of empathy, we've curated some special items for you in the rest of this month's Thrive Guide. Read on to find: an Expert Forecast with Dr. Tori Olds' crisp insights on the types of empathy and future importance of empathy at work; an Emotional Vocabulary entry to define and spotlight fear, an emotion commonly mishandled without empathy; and to wrap up, a five-minute guided meditation on empathy with Recalibrate's wise and centering Lisa Keefauver, MSW.

If you'd like to bring Recalibrate to your workplace through our workshops, 1:1 mini mental wellness sessions, guided meditations, or speaking engagements, visit our [website](#) or [shoot us an email](#) to learn more. ■



EXPERT FORECAST

By *Tori Olds, PhD* | *Contributing Expert*

Let me capture your attention with a line of research that is profound to both our humanity and our workplaces. That is the study of Group IQ, a collective measure of how well attuned various members of a group are to each other's emotional and mental states, by reading information around one another's eyes.



When it comes to the performance of a group, such as our teams in our workplaces, we are increasingly finding that soft skills rooted in empathy are even more important than hard skills.

So, what exactly is empathy? Well, there are many types. There is emotional resonance, which is when we feel alongside another person, joining with their pain and allowing our own mirror neurons to bring us into synchrony with their state. There is perspective taking, which is where we can step out of our own world view and opinions to imagine how another might perceive a situation. There is cognitive empathy, where we can be curious about the inner workings of another person's mind and have understanding for why they might be doing what they are doing. There is empathic concern, also known as compassion, where we not only feel and care about another's suffering, but envision ways to help them and even follow through with concrete action. And last, but not least, there is empathic joy, where we step into celebration for another's triumphs and delight in a shared moment of beauty.

"At its core, empathy is our brain's intrinsic, evolutionarily-driven capacity to create a bridge between our minds and the minds of others."

All of these forms of empathy are essential to the creation of a functioning, harmonious, healthy network of relationships. And as you may have noticed, they are all about connection. At its core, empathy is our brain's intrinsic, evolutionarily-driven capacity to create a bridge between our minds and the minds of others. Without the bridge of empathy, we have no teamwork, no building of shared visions, no creating healthy businesses, no raising healthy children. When we start to lose empathy, we start to lose everything.

If we want success in our workplaces, in our relationships, and in the joy that comes from true human connection, we must learn to empathize. We must find moments to pause from reading our dashboards and slide decks and instead, learn to read the information in each others' eyes. ■



Tori Olds, PhD is an Austin-based psychologist, clinical educator, and co-owner of Deep Eddy Psychotherapy who is passionate about integrating deep, experiential work with the latest science and research in the field. Learn more at deepeddypsychotherapy.com and toriolds.com.

EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY

By Gloria Chan Packer | Recalibrate

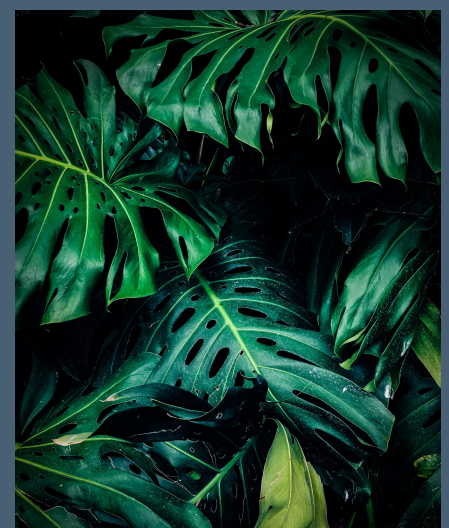
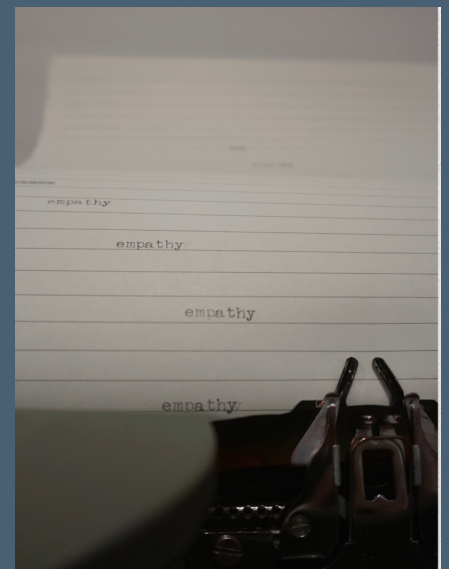
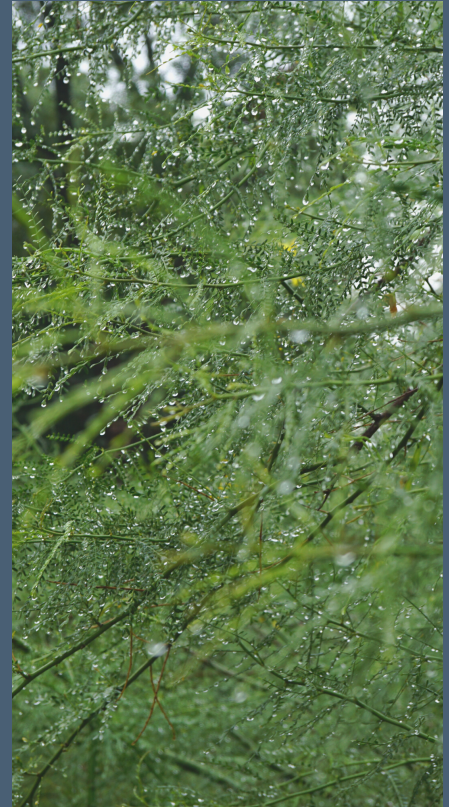
FEAR | noun /'fir/

Why we're talking about it: Fear is often missed or misinterpreted because people act out their fear with anger, defensiveness, or denial. Because popular culture only characterizes fear as meek and retreating, many of us don't realize that other people's off-putting behaviors are actually rooted in their personal, tender fear. Empathy can game-change conflict by uncovering the human fear that makes things feel more relatable.

What it is: Biologically evolved to keep us out of danger, fear is the nervous system's reaction to ensure we are on alert and on guard. Psychologically, fear is defined by the sense that a situation is uneasy, uncertain, and or unsafe. Physiologically, fear appears in the body with wide eyes, clenched jaws, tight chest and stomach, contracted muscles, fast breathing, and an elevated heart rate.

When it happens: Fear occurs when our nervous system perceives a lack of safety, triggered by current sensory information, and mapped from past experiences and memories. ■

"Fear is the hidden root under many off-putting behaviors that disconnect us, where empathy can help reconnect us with our shared humanity."



MENTAL LOVE TAP

by Lisa Keefauver, MSW | Recalibrate

Grab your headphones and take a moment today to recalibrate with this five-minute guided meditation on empathy and compassion, written and recorded by our Lead Advisor, Lisa.



MENTAL WELLNESS AT WORK FEATURED WORKPLACE SERVICES



RECALIBRATE X THE ROWING DOCK

(available to Austin, TX clients only)

We've partnered with [The Rowing Dock on Town Lake](#) to host private group meditations in an effort to promote mental wellness while staying safely distanced, outdoors on the beautiful waters of Town Lake. Available at sunrise and sunset (7a or 7p). Starting at \$355 for a 25-min meditation.

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