

How to Be More Empathetic

By Claire Cain Miller [@clairecm](#)

More and more, we live in bubbles. Most of us are surrounded by people who look like us, vote like us, earn like us, spend money like us, have educations like us and worship like us. The result is an empathy deficit, and it's at the root of many of our biggest problems. It's because of how homogeneous people's social circles have become, and also because humans naturally hold biases. But researchers have discovered that far from being an immutable trait, empathy can be developed. There are steps people can take to acknowledge their biases and to move beyond their own worldviews to try to understand those held by other people. Bonus: You'll make new friends along the way.

Practice Empathy

While some people are naturally more empathetic, there are exercises that anyone can do to improve.

So what is empathy? It's understanding how others feel and being compassionate toward them. It happens when two parts of the brain work together, neuroscientists say — the emotional center perceives the feelings of others and the cognitive center tries to understand why they feel that way and how we can be helpful to them.

Research has shown that empathy makes people better [managers](#) and [workers](#), and better [family members](#) and [friends](#). But it's bigger than just its personal effect. We're all in this together, and [researchers say](#) that connection and compassion are [crucial](#) to a sustainable and humane future.

Some people are more naturally empathetic than others, but there are easy, [evidenced-based](#) exercises that anyone can do to increase their empathy.

Talk to New People

Trying to imagine how someone else feels is often not enough, researchers [have found](#). Luckily, the solution is simple: **Ask them.** “For me, the core of empathy is curiosity,” said Jodi Halpern, a psychiatrist and bioethics professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who [studies](#) empathy. “It's what is another person's life actually like in its particulars?”

Try It:

- Start conversations with strangers or invite a colleague or neighbor you don't know well to lunch. Go beyond small talk – ask them how they're doing and what their daily life is like.
- Follow people on social media with different backgrounds than you have (different race, religion or political persuasion).

- Put away your phone and other screens when you're having conversations, even with the people you see every day, so you can fully listen and notice their facial expressions and gestures.

Try Out Someone Else's Life

Don't just stand in someone else's shoes, as the saying goes, but take a walk in them, said Helen Riess, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School and chief scientist of [Empathetics](#), which provides empathy training for health care practitioners.

- Attend someone else's church, mosque, synagogue or other house of worship for a few weeks [while they attend yours, or visit a village](#) in a developing country and volunteer. Spend time in a new neighborhood, or strike up a conversation with a homeless person in your community.
- If someone's behavior is bothersome, think about why. If it's your teenager, for instance, start by acknowledging that he might feel stressed, but go further: Consider what it's like to live his daily life – what his bus ride is like, how much homework he has and how much sleep he gets.

Join Forces for a Shared Cause

Working on a project with other people reinforces everyone's individual expertise and humanity, and minimizes the differences that can divide people, said Rachel Godsil, a law professor at Rutgers and co-founder of the [Perception Institute](#), which researches how humans form biases and offers workshops on how to overcome them.

- Work on a community garden.
- Do political organizing.
- Join a church committee.
- If you have experienced grief or loss, join with others who have experienced something similar.

"My magic potion would be for communities to have meaningful, heartfelt projects that speak to their grief and vulnerabilities," Dr. Halpern said.

For example, she found [in her research](#) that when women from the former Yugoslavia joined together across ethnic groups to help find the missing bodies of family members, they came to care for and respect each other despite their ethnic groups' conflicts. Similarly, Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost an immediate family member to the violence there come together in a group called [Parents Circle - Families Forum](#).

Admit You're Biased

We're all biased. Acknowledging that is the first step. The second step is taking action to overcome it.

I'll start: I came to researching and writing this piece with my own experiences, privileges and biases. I tried to reflect many different perspectives here, but I most certainly missed some. As you read, try to consider your experiences and take from this what's most relevant to you.

Be Honest With Yourself

“Bias is a natural part of the human condition,” said Erin L. Thomas, a partner at Paradigm, which [helps organizations](#) with diversity and inclusion strategies. “This is adaptive for us to take mental shortcuts and make conclusions about the people around us. Actively working to combat that is what matters.”

Take a Quiz: Biases are often unconscious – we might not realize we have them – so one way to learn more about your biases is to take an unconscious bias quiz, [like this one from Project Implicit](#), a nonprofit started by researchers at Harvard, the University of Washington and the University of Virginia.

Check Your Privilege

The flip side of bias is privilege. Bias puts certain groups of people at a disadvantage in our society, while privilege puts other groups at an advantage.

Your privileges are things that give you special status and that you didn't earn and don't necessarily realize you benefit from. One example is when white people, unlike African-Americans, don't worry about police violence during a routine traffic stop. Another is when someone raised with enough money has never thought about whether they can afford to eat.

We all have different identities, and some make us privileged while others do the opposite. Perhaps you are a white man and also LGBTQ. Or you are able-bodied and an immigrant.

Take a Quiz: [This short one](#) helps shine a light on your privileges. It calculates your “American dream score,” which takes into account the factors that were working in your favor and those you had to overcome to get where you are today – like how good your school was, how financially secure your parents were and how much access you've had to health care.

Other researchers have also made [lists of questions and activities](#) that can help you [understand your privilege](#).

To start, [ask yourself](#) a few questions:

- When was the last time you had to think about your race, ethnicity, gender, religion, ability level or sexual orientation?
- When watching movies or TV, how often do you see characters who reflect who you are?
- How often are you in social settings where most people are of a different identity than you are?

Again, Talking to People Helps

One of the most important ways to confront bias and privilege in your life is to hear from others about their everyday lives, and consider how they're different from yours, Ms. Thomas said.

It can be as simple as having lunch with a colleague and asking about their routines, she said. Maybe you'll learn that they leave early to care for a family member or drive a different commute because they're afraid of interacting with police. Perhaps they never feel heard in meetings, or struggle to find a time and place to pump breast milk during the day.

"The more you hear about the things that other folks have to factor into their day, the more you recognize the things you don't have to pay attention to," Ms. Thomas said.

Stand Up for Others

Empathy should drive us to act compassionately toward others.

Take Action

The next step, after acknowledging your privileges, is to put them to use on behalf of groups who don't have them.

Some ways to do this:

- Donate money to causes that help people in need or attend a rally in support of them.
- Speak up when someone makes a discriminatory comment or interrupts. This is especially important to do when you're not part of the community being undermined, Ms. Thomas said.
 - If someone interrupts, [you could say](#): "I think she was still in the middle of sharing her idea, let's make sure she has a chance to finish before we move on."
 - If someone makes an offensive joke or disparaging comment, simply say: "What you just said is offensive."

Amplify Other Voices

Sometimes the most powerful thing you can do is step aside and create a space for those outside your group to speak.

Some ways to do this:

- If you want to share an article online, find one written by a member of an underrepresented group or a member of the community that the article is about.
- If you hear someone ignore or take credit for someone else's idea, you could say: "She has a point, let's discuss it."

It's Not About You

- **Remember that you don't need to understand everything about someone to [make them feel respected](#).**
- **Advocate for things that will help others, even if they [don't directly affect you](#),** like pushing for paid parental leave [even if you're not a parent](#), or helping to organize an event for LGBTQ colleagues even if you're not part of that community.
- **Don't make assumptions about people based on what your life is like.** When you're asking colleagues about their lives, don't assume, for instance, that they have an opposite-sex partner, three healthy children, or a beautiful, spacious home.
- In workplaces, women and people of color do more of what researchers call office housework – unglamorous chores like getting coffee for a meeting or arranging a colleague's goodbye party. Recognize when this happens, and **if you're not part of one of these groups, take on these tasks and recruit others to as well.**

Keep Learning

Read Books

Reading is one of the best ways to open your mind to the experiences of others.

Lose Yourself in Fiction

Reading literary fiction requires people to enter characters' lives and minds – and by doing so, it increases people's capacity to understand other people's thoughts and feelings, researchers at the New School [have found](#). People who read literary fiction performed better on tests of empathy and emotional intelligence afterward.

“You enter the thoughts, heart and mind of another person who's not like you, and it really does break down barriers,” said Dr. Riess, whose book, “[The Empathy Effect: Seven Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work and Connect Across Difference](#)” came out in November.

Choose novels with narrators who have lives and backgrounds unlike yours, or who live in a different place or time. Choose diverse authors, too.

One place to start: The 2018 National Book Awards [finalists for fiction](#). Their characters include a group of black men in New York City; a teenage Cherokee boy; and a group of queer friends in Chicago during the AIDS epidemic. Here are the titles of those:

- “A Lucky Man” by Jamel Brinkley
- “Where the Dead Sit Talking” by Brandon Tobson
- “The Great Believers” by Rebecca Makkai

Learn From Nonfiction

Read about the lives, struggles and fights against oppression of different groups of people — in history books and essay collections and newspapers.

A few places to start:

- Book Riot has a list of [books about racial issues](#). Here are three:

“So You Want to Talk About Race” by Ijeoma Oluo.

“The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness” by Michelle Alexander

“The Making of Asian America: A History” by Erika Lee

- This year’s [finalists for nonfiction](#) in the National Book Awards include books about the relationship between George Washington and Native American leaders; the experience of growing up poor in the Midwest; and one of the key architects of the Harlem Renaissance:

“The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans and the Birth of the Nation” by Colin G. Calloway

“Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth” by Sarah Smarsh

“The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke” by Jeffrey C. Stewart

“[Rising Out of Hatred](#): The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist,” published this fall by Eli Saslow, is about radical acts of empathy. It’s the story of a former white nationalist who changed his heart and mind after a group of Orthodox Jewish students at his college began inviting him to their Shabbat dinners.

Expand Your Research

Read and watch first-person accounts of the experiences of others in magazines and newspapers, on social media and in podcasts and documentaries.

The New York Times [Op-Docs channel](#) is one place to start. For example, it includes [a series of first-person documentaries about race](#) in which people from a variety of backgrounds talk about their experiences.

The University of California, Berkeley’s division of equity and inclusion has more [suggestions for reading, watching and listening](#), including these documentaries:

“Hale,” directed by Brad Bailey, about a man with cerebral palsy since birth

“Almost Sunrise,” directed by Michael Collins, about two Iraq War veterans who struggle with depression after returning home

“Poor Kids,” directed by Jezza Neumann, about child poverty in the United States

Raise Empathetic Kids

Children can learn empathy. The first step is modeling it yourself.

Jaime Jacob

Teach Them Empathy

Children [show empathy](#) from the time they’re babies, when they mimic facial expressions and learn to smile back at people. It takes longer for them to learn to consider other people’s perspectives (as is clear to anyone who’s seen toddlers battle over sharing toys)! But there are ways parents and caregivers can [teach empathy](#).

- **Ask children what they think characters in books or during imaginative play are feeling**, based on their facial expressions or what’s happening to them in the story.
- **Don’t instruct your kid to say sorry.** It’s a natural instinct, but experts say it can backfire because it doesn’t require them to genuinely think about the other person’s feelings. Instead, ask questions like: “How do you think he’s feeling? What could you do to help him feel better?”
- **Help your children [name their emotions](#).** When they’re crying in frustration or anger, or don’t want bedtime to come or school to start, give them words for their feelings. Express your feelings in front of them, too, using the full range of emotional vocabulary.
- When you’re discussing problems they’re having, like with a sibling or friend at school, **ask them to consider the other person’s perspective.**

Model empathy and compassion by bringing soup to a friend who’s going through a hard time, volunteering as a family in your community or bringing a welcome bouquet to a new family at school.

Read to Them

Just like novels do for adults, children’s books take them into characters’ lives, hearts and minds. The first step is choosing books with a diverse cast of characters – including children of color, strong female protagonists and children with disabilities – so children can see [characters they identify with](#) and those they don’t.

Parents and caregivers can also use books to discuss issues like discrimination. A membership with the [Little Feminist](#) book club sends books, along with activities and discussion questions,

for talking about gender equality and diversity with girls and boys. [EmbraceRace](#) has a list of 26 children's books to start conversations about race.

Here are three books [recommended by](#) Maria Russo, the children's books editor at The New York Times Book Review:

- “The Snowy Day” by Ezra Jack Keats: The first full color picture book centered around an African-American child remains touching today.
- “Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote” by Duncan Tonatiuh: A rabbit family faces challenges when they try to migrate north.
- “The Thing About Luck” by Cynthia Kadohata: A 12-year-old Japanese-American girl moves to the Midwest for the summer to live with her old-fashioned grandparents.

And here are three books recommended by the people at Little Feminist book club:

- “Drum Dream Girl” by Margarita Engle and illustrated by Rafael López: Based on a true story, a young Cuban girl dreams of being a drummer but is told she can't because she's a girl.
- “Jabari Jumps” by Gaia Cornwall: When Jabari tries to jump off the diving board, he faces his fears and expresses his vulnerability with the help of his father.
- “Introducing Teddy” by Jessica Walton and illustrated by Dougal MacPherson: A teddy bear tells its young human friend that it's a girl inside, not a boy, and the friend accepts the teddy just the way it is.

Talk About Bias

Many parents, especially those who are white, try to avoid talking about race, gender identity, income level or other differences among people, believing that if they expose their children to diversity without making a big deal about it, their children will grow up without prejudice.

But [research has shown](#) that's not true. Even preschoolers see differences – and also hold biases. When adults don't talk to children about it, it can make it worse – children end up absorbing societal stereotypes or assuming it's a taboo topic.

For families of color, these conversations often start much earlier by necessity, said Dawn Dow, a sociologist at the University of Maryland who [studies](#) race and family. Parents try to protect their children from racism and make sure they're exposed to people like them.

Have the [hard discussions](#), researchers say. Bring up topics like race. Talk to them about the fact that racism exists; that boys and girls haven't always been allowed to do the same things; that different families have different levels of resources; that people's bodies are unique shapes and sizes; that families are made up of different combinations of people.

Don't silence children when they remark on skin color, or skip the parts in books when characters face discrimination – these are the learning moments. Instead, talk about discrimination, and [why it's wrong](#). If they make a comment in public, experts suggest saying

[something like](#), “Yes, people come in all different skin colors, just like you and I have different hair colors.”

[Diversify their media diet](#), not just with stories of historical figures but also children of color “doing normal things, enjoying their lives,” Ms. Dow said. She gave as examples the Nick Jr. cartoon “Dora the Explorer” and the book “Lola at the Library.”

“They worry that talking about race and racism will cause their children to be racist,” Jessica Calarco, a sociologist at Indiana University, said of parents. “But that’s not what the research shows. Children who have those open, honest conversations with their parents are better able to recognize the structural inequalities that exist in our society.”

Teach Them to Fight Stereotypes

Researchers say children are aware of stereotypes by age 3. Counter them by encouraging children to do a wide variety of activities and spend time with a range of friends. Model the same in your own life — starting with sharing the chores at home.

If children say “Boys don’t play with dolls” or “Girls aren’t good at science,” remind them that’s not true. If you notice stereotypes in the shows they watch or the books they read, discuss them: “Does it seem fair that only the boys got to participate in the baseball game?” or “Why do you think the mother is the one doing all the cooking for the children?”

Teach them what to do if they experience discrimination or see someone else experiencing it, and role play with them. Teach them to say, “Stop” or “That’s unkind,” or to stand next to the person who’s being targeted, or to find a trusted adult.

Hard Conversations

Frank, respectful conversations can go a long way toward opening people’s minds.

[In one study](#), canvassers visited the homes of 500 Florida voters and had a conversation about transgender rights. They also asked people to reflect on their own experiences of being treated differently. Afterward, the voters in the study showed [more support](#) for transgender people and for laws protecting them. Something similar happens at the [Change My View subreddit](#). People have [described it](#) as the most civilized place on the internet, where people respectfully discuss controversial topics and are open to [changing their minds](#). Both examples show the power of having conversations about topics that might seem hard or uncomfortable. “The goal is not to be comfortable,” Ms. Thomas said. “It’s to stretch ourselves and expose ourselves to others’ points of view. I compare it to yoga – getting comfortable by being uncomfortable. If you are comfortable, you probably aren’t doing it right.” Here are some tips for having uncomfortable conversations:

Learn to Be Quiet

[If you're uncomfortable](#) with the topic of conversation, or if someone has told you that you said something that was offensive, the first step is to listen. Some [common errors](#), experts say, are:

- [focusing on your own feelings](#) instead of the other person's
- making the conversation about you
- blaming the victim or denying that their experiences happened.

Here are some things to do instead:

- **Step One:** Don't say anything. Just listen.
- **Step Two:** If you offended someone, apologize (and apologize earnestly).
- **Step Three:** Do your research. Read articles written by people who have had firsthand experiences with what you're discussing.

Be Open to Changing Your Mind

Follow some of the ground rules at the Change My View subreddit:

- **Don't be rude or hostile.**
- **Don't create echo chambers:** Express opposing views, and explain the reasoning behind them.
- **Engage in the conversation:** Don't state your position and walk away.
- If no one has changed their mind after three rounds of going back and forth, **consider agreeing to disagree.**
- **If you change your mind, be proud of it and tell people you did so.**

Learn to Listen

Truly listening to someone requires active engagement. Here are some tips from Dr. Riess, the Harvard psychiatrist:

- Use your body language to show that you're open to listening: uncross your arms, lean slightly forward, make eye contact.
- Pay close attention to the speaker's facial expressions and body language, which can convey more emotions than their words.
- Don't interrupt.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Put away your phone.

Remember: It Doesn't Have to Be Hard

We're all humans, and we all have the natural desire to connect with one another. Building our empathy, considering the perspectives of others and opening ourselves to uncomfortable conversations can make that happen. "We have made it fraught, but it doesn't have to be," said Ms. Godsil, the Rutgers law professor. "Once it's the norm, it's wildly freeing for everyone."

About the Author

Claire Cain Miller, a correspondent for The New York Times, writes about gender, families and the future of work for the Upshot, the New York Times section for analytical journalism in words and graphics. The beat has included writing about [robots](#), raising [feminist boys](#) and real ways to [make work more equal](#). She has been at the Times for a decade, and previously covered the tech industry for Business Day. She lives on the West Coast with her family.

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