

**Empathy,
An Essay on Compassion
by Jason Lee Beck**

**Courtesy of Spotlight on Recovery Magazine.*

I attempted to look up the definition for the word “empathy” just now in my little paperback sized Webster's New Dictionary. I figured it would be a great way to begin an essay on empathy with the proper definition of the word. Can you guess what I found when I thumbed through those pages, searching?

Absolutely nothing.

That amazed me. For such an important word, indeed in my humble opinion one of the most important words in the English language, to be absent from a good dictionary was stunning to say the least. Shocking. Needless to say, I wanted to throw the little book across the dorm (I am incarcerated in prison and currently in therapy, living in a dormitory.). However, I pondered if the little book would like very much to be hurled into yonder wall. I wondered if it would feel pain. Would its pages hurt? Actually, I didn't think about that. I simply decided that my essay may benefit from some comic relief. I feel I must confess that I did hurl that inanimate object. I chucked it hard.

Take that.

If you don't know what empathy is, I laid out a good example in the above paragraph, albeit not a serious one. Empathy, which is vastly different from its kin-word, “sympathy”, means to put yourself in someone else's shoes, their position, and to ultimately understand how they feel. Sympathy, on the other hand, is merely feeling sorrow for someone. Empathy is understanding why they hurt. By the way, I felt absolutely zero sympathy for the afore mentioned piece of literature.

If life was a role-playing video game, and I was a character racking up attribute points, my empathy points would have been decidedly low prior to my incarceration beginning three years ago. I really didn't care much about anyone but myself. I didn't care if my unhealthy addictions were hurting those I loved and cared about. I only cared about my chosen vices: self medicating myself with drugs and pornography. They kind of go hand in hand don't they?

By learning empathy, which is one of the very first things you learn in any good therapy program, I was able to unlock a vast ocean of feelings I didn't know I had, or even knew I was capable of feeling. And to think I always thought myself cold inside. Now, all of a sudden, I was very aware of how my arrogance and selfishness had hurt the ones I loved most. They, the people that stood by me through thick and thin.

Coming to prison was the last straw, the last shred of patience they had for me. My wife of eight years left me, I can't blame her, and now I am left with little more than the ground beneath my feet. But, you know what? After all that sorrow began to depart my soul, and I began to understand empathy, I realized to my distinct surprise that I now feel like the richest man on earth because of the feelings I have inside me, hidden feelings. I know that when I am released that it will be different, so different. I care about the implications and effects my actions have on myself and others. I care about how I affect them.

Empathy, to me, is the most beautiful thing ever. It is the most precious quality that undeniably makes us human. I'm considering getting it tattooed on me. It's that important. Even the mere utterance of the word itself is an intervention for when I feel myself slipping into my cycles of addictive behavior. If everyone could learn how to unlock empathy within themselves, and understand and use it, the world would be much better place. Empathy is the solid foundation I needed to find within myself for which to build a better man.