

## What it Means To be An Empath

by Erica Leibrandt

A few weeks ago I wrote an article called *A Narcissist and an Empath Walk into a Bar* about my marriage to an abusive man.

For me, it was an important step forward in understanding how I let the cycle of abuse evolve and remain in place for so long.

I already knew that my ex was a narcissist who had sociopathic tendencies, but it was seeing myself as an empath for the first time that allowed me to begin to answer some troubling questions.

Of course, any time we think we've answered one question, 10 more pop up. In my article, I was using the word empath to describe myself as highly sensitive and responsive to other people's emotional states. I later discovered, however, that being a true empath means quite a bit more than that.

To be empathetic is to have the ability to imagine other people's feelings. To be an empath means you actually feel them as if they are your own.

The theory goes that everything is made of energy, including emotions. Empaths energetically internalize the feelings of others and often have trouble distinguishing whether they are experiencing their own, or someone else's emotions.

If that is true (and it is a hotly debated topic, to be sure) then the question becomes, how do we know if we are simply empathetic (otherwise known as a "highly sensitive person" or H.S.P.) or a capital E empath? And perhaps more importantly, why does it matter?

Initially, I thought the difference between being empathetic and being an empath was simply a matter of degree. In other words, I believed an empath was just a really empathetic person. That is not true. A real empath feels things differently than someone who is just empathetic. Their nervous systems are designed to co-opt the emotional—and sometimes physical—energy of those around them. They don't just understand what other people feel, they experience it themselves.

I found several questionnaires intended to help clarify the issue. Here is the best one (in my opinion).

Signs (not proof!) of being an empath:

- People tell you that they feel better after talking to you about their physical and/or emotional pains, but you tend to feel worse after such conversations.
- You've experienced having aches and pains, or intense emotions out of nowhere, only to find out later that someone you love is going through exactly that.
- When you're in a room with many people, your emotions and/or the physical sensations in your body often change extremely from one moment to the next. You're worried that you may be crazy somehow. Yet, when you're by yourself, things tend to calm down.

- You have trouble concentrating when other people are around, but you're able to concentrate just fine when you're by yourself.

- Some people get extremely uncomfortable around you, because they feel that you see right through them. You might have noticed that people avoid you when they want to hide what they are going through somehow.

- You know a lot about other people, without knowing how. You used to think that everyone knew this much about everyone, but are coming to the realization that this is—strangely—not the case.

- You feel extremely responsible for the well-being of the people around you. People have told you to let go, or not take things so seriously, but you just can't.

- When you're around certain people, you suddenly find yourself feeling, thinking and/or acting out of character. Without those people there, you revert back to your usual self. Depending on how you feel influenced, this can either be interesting and liberating, or a little scary and worrisome.

- You have trouble knowing what you want and need. To figure that out, you usually need to be by yourself for a stretch of time, and even then it may be much easier to voice what others want from you, than to say what you want for yourself.

- You struggle with setting boundaries because the disappointment, anger and grief (and other emotions) of other people impacts you deeply. It seems that, no matter what you do, it's always lose-lose for you. Either you stand up for yourself, and get overwhelmed by the negative reactions of others, or you do what they want and don't feel good about yourself.

- Your body often feels icky, murky, dark and unpleasant, even if you have no medical condition to attribute those feelings to. For that reason, you like to do things which take your attention away from being physically aware of how your body feels.

- You can feel and act drunk, simply by being around other drunk people, without having had a drop of alcohol yourself.

- You notice that you're more directly impacted by other people's energy when looking someone directly in the eye, being in close proximity to someone or having a strong personal bond with someone (that can influence you over long distances).

- People tend to tell you things that "they've never told anyone before" even if they hardly know you.

- Crowds tend to be overwhelming and draining for you, unless they're an exceptionally feel-good bunch.

12 out of 15 of these statements strongly applied to me. So am I some kind of clairvoyant? Or am I just someone who feels a deep connection to others all the time?

The problem with being extremely empathetic or empathic is that other people's emotions carry a lot more weight than our own. If someone around me, either friend, family member, co-worker, student or even a pet, is in distress, I become overwhelmed with their energy. I feel nauseous and panicked and will do anything I can to help alleviate their discomfort so that I can feel better as well.

Is this selfish? Of course it is. But by the same token, over time I have learned—not just the relief I feel in helping others—but the joy I experience when they are no longer in pain. So, not only have I been highly motivated by my personal discomfort to table my own emotions in order to help others, I've gotten a lot of positive reinforcement for doing so.

The problem is, during this process, my own needs and feelings become sublimated. If I'm always trying to determine and provide what everyone else needs/wants, how can I ever be in touch with what I need/want?

As someone who has allowed myself to become inextricably entwined with pretty much every soul I come into contact with, I literally have no autonomy. I have never allowed myself to be fully me, but merely an adjunct of others.

At 44 years old, I'm ready to change. This is the crossroads that most empathetic or empathic people must come to sooner or later. If we spend out entire lives stuffing down our own energy to transform the energy of others, we become depleted, depressed, resentful and in the end, a mere shadow of the vibrant soul we once were.

The only way to change this behavior is to be able to maintain what I'll call a "compassionate distance." This is a state of mind in which we (lovingly) acknowledge the feelings of others and the affect it has on us, while trying to maintain the distinction between those feelings and our own. We must become much more observers and much less reactors, at least at the beginning.

I am only just starting to work this out for myself. It will be a long time before I can tolerate the discomfort of the people around me without the overwhelming need to rush in and "fix it." But with enough practice, I believe it is possible.

The principles of yoga and mindfulness are the key. I must cultivate the ability to watch my emotions come and go without judgement. Sitting in daily meditation, trying to feel and release the physical sensations of anxiety: the clenched stomach, the sleeplessness, the clamped jaw, the racing heart etc., and remembering that I can't truly heal anyone until I learn how to honor myself will all help.

Being an HSP, an Empath or simply a deeply empathetic person is a complicated gift. If we learn to navigate it wisely, there is no limit to what we can offer ourselves and the world.