A fact sheet about

The double empathy problem

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The double empathy problem

What the double empathy problem is, what research found, and one step to try.



Key points

- The double empathy problem (definition below) means that when two people take in the world in different ways, each can find the other hard to read.
- So when a conversation goes wrong, the gap usually goes both ways. It is not proof that you lack empathy or that you are bad with people.
- Research has found that autistic people can understand each other well, and that mixed autistic and non-autistic pairs often feel less in tune. There is little research yet with ADHD and other neurodivergent people, but many say they feel the same gap with neurotypical people.
- One step to try: after a conversation goes wrong, ask what both of you may have missed.

What the double empathy problem is

You tell a cousin a plain fact, and they decide you were being rude. A friend drops a hint about what they want. You only find out a week later that you were meant to pick it up. Or someone asks how you are, and they seem put out when you tell them the real answer.

You may have heard for most of your life that moments like these show a gap in you. The double empathy problem explains them in a different way, and a fairer one.

For a long time, autistic people were said to lack empathy. That meant they were seen as not able to work out what other people think and feel. An autistic researcher pointed out that this only looks at one side. When two people take in the world in very different ways, each can lose track of what the other means. He called this the double empathy problem.

So a non-autistic person can find it just as hard to read an autistic person. They may misread a flat face as cross, or a direct answer as cold. The difference is that, for years, only one side of that gap was treated as a problem.

Empathy here means working out what is going on for someone else. It is not the same as caring, and missing a cue does not mean you do not care.

The idea is about the gap between two people, not about one neurotype.Two people can misread each other for many reasons, such as how they grew up or how their brains work. So the same gap can open between an ADHD and a non-ADHD person, or between any neurodivergent and neurotypical person.

You can read more about why some conversations feel so much easier than others here.

What research has found

Research has backed the idea up in a few ways.

In one study, people passed a story along a chain, from one person to the next. Chains of autistic people kept as much of the story as chains of non-autistic people did. Mixed chains lost more of it, and people in them felt less at ease with each other.

In another study, people read about an autistic worker having a hard day. Autistic readers more often worked out what was going on for that worker than non-autistic readers did.

Autistic adults have also said they feel more at ease with autistic friends and family. They feel better understood, and they have less to explain.

None of this means non-autistic people are to blame either. It means both people bring something to the gap, and both can help close it.

Most of the research is with autistic and non-autistic adults, and little has looked at ADHD or other neurodivergent people yet. But many ADHD and other neurodivergent people say they feel the same gap with neurotypical people, and feel more at ease with other neurodivergent people. Some call these people their "neurokin". That lived experience counts too.

More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: ask what both sides missed

When a talk goes wrong, it is easy to replay only your own part of it. This step looks at both sides, and it works best later, once you are calm.

Think of one talk that went wrong this week. Then write down two short things:

- one thing you may have missed, such as a hint, a change in their tone, or what they were hoping you would say
- one thing they may have missed, such as what you meant, what you needed, or why you answered the way you did

Then, if you want to, pick one small thing that could help next time:

- saying plainly what you mean
- asking "Do you mean that, or is it a hint?"
- following up in a message, if that is easier for you

You can keep these notes in the Understanding Zoe app and look back on them later. Over time, you may notice which people and which kinds of talk tend to go wrong.

This step comes from what autistic, ADHD and other neurodivergent adults say has helped them.

It is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

It is not your job to close every gap on your own. The double empathy problem goes both ways, so it is fair to ask other people to meet you partway. Some people will not, and that is useful to know when you choose who to spend time with.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you look at how you and the people around you communicate, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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