



THOUGHT
for the day

Issue 14

February 1st 2010

EMPATHY

What is **empathy** and what does it mean?

The dictionary says, “**The power of entering into another’s personality and imaginatively experiencing his or her experiences.**”

In everyday language, this means, “putting yourself in the other person’s shoes” or “imagining what it means to be another person and feeling or experiencing something as they do.”

Why is this important? Why should we care? “What does this have to do with me?” you might ask.

Well, empathy is one of the qualities that distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom, like the ability to reflect upon our experiences and modify or change our behaviour accordingly. How many times have we said, when considering the experiences of others, “I’m glad it didn’t happen to me!” or “I don’t know how they manage to keep going, after what happened.”

We feel empathy when we cry at a sad film or cheer at somebody else’s success or good fortune. This explains why we donate to charities such as what is happening in Haiti or cheer when a missing child is found. “So what!” you might say. “**Why should I care?**”

Well, if we don’t empathize with others, we end up tolerating things that we shouldn’t. **If we don’t empathize, terrible things can happen.**

You might remember the news story last week about the two brothers, aged 10 & 11, who tortured two other boys, almost to the point of death during an attack on a local common in the north of England. You might have heard of the terrible murder of the 2 year old Jamie Bulger by two 10 year old boys in 1993. If you do, you probably ask yourself the question, “**How could they do that?**” Well, there are no easy explanations, but surely, we can assume that if the boys who did these terrible things were able to imagine what it was like to be their victims, perhaps they wouldn’t have done what they did. It’s as if they didn’t see their victims as being like them, the same as them, their equals.

Throughout history, we see evidence of this failure to empathise, to understand what it is to be the “victim” in a situation. Europeans tolerated and participated in slavery because they didn’t see the black people of Africa as being humans like them. The atrocities of the Holocaust were tolerated by ordinary Germans because of a long campaign by the Nazis to portray the Jews as “sub-humans”. Racism is based on the assumption that other races are inferior and so don’t experience or see the world in the same way as the racists. Of course, these are extreme examples, but they are essentially examples of a lack of empathy for others.

On an everyday level, a lack of empathy leads to bullying or abuse, whether it’s based on race, sexuality, gender, or just because we don’t like someone. When we participate in gossip, do we imagine how it affects the victim? When we post comments on Facebook or Bebo, do we think about how the subject of these comments might feel? When we print pictures of other students, write comments on them and post them around school, do we think about how the person in the photo feels?

When we gang up and mock someone for being too fat, or being too thin, do we think about how they feel?

When we mock somebody else’s clothes or possessions as “budget”, do we ever stop to think about their feelings?

When we exclude individuals from our social groups, do we think about how lonely they might feel?

When we “cuss” others, what are we trying to achieve? Would we be happy to be the recipient of the “cussing”?

Most of us know what it is like to be the “victim” of practices such as those mentioned above, so why do we still decide that it is acceptable to inflict them upon others? The answer is clear; a lack of empathy. We don’t put ourselves in the victim’s shoes. We have stopped imagining what it is like to be on the receiving end of verbal, physical, racial, homophobic, cyber, social, sexual, psychological, gender or body shape abuse.

Think how the other person would feel; would you be happy in their shoes? If not? Don’t do it. **EMPATHISE!**

- Thought for the Day should provoke thought and reflective exchanges between students.
- The strategies for Thought for the Day will be for tutors to put all or some of the ideas suggested each week before their students during registration and invite their responses.
- Thought for the Day is concerned with developing students’ knowledge and opinions about contemporary issues and with generating an understanding of human behaviour.
- These opportunities to gain knowledge and understanding through mutual exchange in response to given stimuli should be carefully and sensitively presented and monitored.
- In particular they should be able to appreciate the difference between what is right and what is wrong in a variety of situations.
- This definition of our expectations is open to debate, change and development. Ideas and contributions to ‘Thought for the Day’ will be welcomed. Please talk or write to Michael Tucker (michaeltuckeratwork@hotmail.co.uk) or Oliver Scott on (elliottstudentvoice@hotmail.com)
- It will be as concerned with the moral and spiritual as it will be with truth and justice in both everyday actions and in the wider world.

This is a Student Voice document

