

What is the **DOUBLE EMPATHY PROBLEM?**



The Double Empathy Problem refers to the fact that no one has direct access to another person's thoughts, intentions, and feelings. We are all more or less guessing about what other people mean all the time. The more similar our background, experiences, upbringing, etc., the easier it is to guess at another person's thoughts and feelings. Differences in cognitive styles, communication styles, and cultural background make it harder to guess.

This means autistic people are not necessarily bad at communicating: they just have different cognitive and communication styles, and find it hard to guess what non-autistic people are thinking and feeling. This goes both ways: non-autistic people are not great at guessing what autistic people are thinking and feeling.



The term was first coined by Damien Milton in 2012. Since then, both he and other researchers have explored the evidence that this is true, as well as how the Double Empathy Problem impacts autistic people.



WHAT IS EMPATHY?

- In psychology, empathy refers to “feeling what another feels” and is based neurologically on the process of subconsciously mirroring the facial expressions/body language of others and experiencing a small amount of the emotion that “goes with” those nonverbal behaviors. For example, you know how it felt when your friends laughed at you so you feel bad when you see people laughing at someone else.
- Sympathy refers to sharing another's feeling based on shared experience. Successful sympathy depends on identifying another person as like you in some way AND identifying circumstances as similar in some way.
- Although the “Double Empathy Problem” is actually talking more about sympathy, the person who identified it called it the Double Empathy Problem and the name stuck.

EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENCES

There are many kinds of differences that can make communication harder between two people. The more differences between two people, the harder it is for them to communicate. Differences can be in background, like race, religion, class, or gender. Others are cognitive and communication styles. These styles are not all one or all the other: they exist on a spectrum.

DIFFERENT THINKING STYLES



Bottom up vs. top down thinking: do you see details first and build a bigger picture, or do you see the whole first and move down to details?



Categorical vs. continuous: do you see things as all one thing or another thing, or do you see categories that blend together and overlap, like shades of gray?



Logical vs. intuitive: do you focus on facts and logic when you understand something or do you focus more on feelings?



Visual vs. verbal vs. kinesthetic: how do you process information? Do you need visuals, do you prefer to use words, or do you like to process through your body?



DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES



Precise vs. metaphoric: do you like your language to be exact and more literal, or do you use stylistic speech to get an emotion or point across?



Consistent vs. context specific: are things the same across all contexts (especially language) or do you adjust how you speak and behave based on the context around you?



Speak the truth focus vs. say what is appropriate focus: do you care more about always being truthful or will you adjust to social norms?



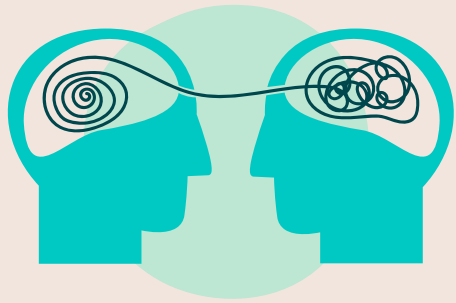
Detail vs. summarizing: do you give all the details about something or do you focus on summarizing what's most important?



Flat vs. labile facial expression: do you move your face and make lots of expressions while you communicate, or does your face stay mostly still?



What is **THEORY OF MIND**?



Theory of Mind is the human ability to understand that other people have different knowledge, beliefs, intentions, values, and thoughts from your own. This skill helps us to predict other people's behavior and guess what they're feeling or thinking. Most people begin to develop Theory of Mind between ages three and five.



What does Theory of Mind have to do with autism? Historically, service providers and researchers proposed that autistic individuals don't develop Theory of Mind skills, which would explain many of the social and communication challenges in the diagnosis.



How does Theory of Mind relate to the Double Empathy Problem? The Double Empathy Problem provides a different explanation for the social and communication challenges of autism and suggests that autistics aren't *bad* at Theory of Mind. Instead, all people are better at Theory of Mind for people they're more similar to and autistics are often trying to communicate across big differences. This suggests the communication challenges between autistics and non-autistics are mutual rather than because of an autistic person's deficits.

Research Supports Double Empathy Over Theory of Mind Challenges in Autism

- Non-autistic people struggle to guess mental states of autistic people (Edey et al)
- Non-autistic people misinterpret autistic people's facial expressions (Sheppard et al)
- Autistic people share information with other autistic people as accurately as non-autistic people do with other non-autistic people (Crompton et al)
- See references for more examples

The impact **ON AUTISTICS**

Even though autistic communication is fairly effective when it is between autistic people, it is seen as a deficit. It is diagnosed as a disorder. It is corrected through therapies and treatments. The autistic person is always expected to change to meet the neurotypical expectations of communication. This has significant impacts on autistic people throughout their lives. Some of those impacts are:



Mental Health

Multiple studies show that autistic people are seen as less likable and less trustworthy than peers. When other people can't understand or communicate with autistic people, it results in isolation, loneliness, stigma and stereotyping, and a society that is hostile. Autistic people have significantly higher rates of mental illness than neurotypical populations. The Double Empathy Problem can also lead to communication breakdowns in relationships, making it hard for autistics to start or maintain friendships and romantic relationships.



School

When teachers and peers can't effectively communicate with a student, we see discrimination and exclusion. Many autistic people report being the victim of bullying in their school years. It's also common for autistic students to struggle with school, even if they can understand the material because they cannot communicate what they know or they are misunderstood by teachers.



Work

Autistics are unemployed at extremely high rates, with studies finding as many as 85% of autistics are unemployed. Communication breakdowns are often part of the challenge. From the interview process to working with co-workers, communication plays a huge role in how managers view an employee.



Service Access and Goals

Historically, many service providers have focused on making autistics better at neurotypical styles of communication. This means that goals include things like making eye contact or using neurotypical nonverbal communication. Over time, this leads to burnout and mental health challenges. In addition, when autistic individuals communicate in their own style, providers (including medical providers) often misunderstand or don't believe what autistics are saying, which can lead to difficulty accessing services.

How you can **MAKE A DIFFERENCE**



Learn about autistic communication. Read autistic writers, watch and listen to autistic content creators, and notice how autistic people communicate with each other. When you can, notice how autistic communication works well and think about how you could try using an autistic communication style.



Be willing to change your style of communication when you're with autistic people. Learn more about practicing and respecting autistic communication styles in our Double Empathy Communication Guide.



Ask autistics about their perspectives and experiences. This is especially important when you're doing anything that will affect autistics, like writing treatment goals or IEPs. Always double check goals and ask yourself if the goal is trying to make an autistic person communicate more like a neurotypical.



Be aware of your language. Instead of talking about communication or socialization deficits, talk about the differences between autistic communication and non-autistic communication. This will help you focus on strengths and notice where non-autistic people can work to make the world more accessible and welcoming to autistics.

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