

# The Anatomy of Empathy

At a basic level of description, empathy can be conceived of as an interaction between any two individuals, with one experiencing and sharing the feeling of the other. This sharing of feelings does not necessarily imply that one will act or even feel impelled to act in a supportive or even sympathetic way.

Neuroscience research and functional magnetic resonance imaging experiments have shown that empathy has three primary components which can be assigned to neural activity in specific regions of the brain:

- a largely involuntary response to another person, which normally entails sharing that person's emotional state; (there is abundant evidence that individuals come to understand the emotional and affective states expressed by others with the help of the neural architecture that produces such states in themselves; as a result, viewing facial expressions for instance triggers similar facial expressions on one's own face, a process called unconscious automatic mimicry!)
- a cognitive capacity to take the perspective of the other person, to transpose oneself imaginatively into his or her feeling and thinking, to mentally simulate the other's perspective using one's own neural machinery;
- the ability of being aware of one's own emotions and feelings, and to reflect on them – i.e. (paradoxically): the ability to disentangle oneself from the other person, to maintain a sense of whose feelings belong to whom.

Source: Jean Decety and Philip L. Jackson, *A Social-Neuroscience Perspective on Empathy*, Current Directions in Psychological Science, Volume 15, Number 2 (2006)