



THE EMPATHY WORKOUT

I can't say I always enjoy cardiovascular exercise. I don't think anyone does. Oh, I've seen those infomercials featuring models whose granite abs and manic smiles become even more sharply defined at the very sight of workout equipment. But as we all know, these people are from Neptune. Being an Earth-human myself, I strongly resist abandoning my customary torpor to participate in perky physical activity of any kind. Nevertheless, I do cardio pretty regularly. I do it because I know my heart was designed to handle such challenges, because once I get started, I feel that it's doing me good, and because if I stop for very long, my health begins to atrophy.

There's another form of cardio that works much the same way, though it affects the emotional heart rather than the one made of auricles and ventricles. This workout consists of deliberately cultivating empathy. To empathize literally means "to suffer with," to share the pain of other beings so entirely that their agony becomes our own. I know this sounds like a terrific hobby for a masochistic moron, but hear me out.

The reason to develop a capacity for empathy, and then exercise it regularly, is that only a heart strengthened by this kind of understanding can effectively deliver the oxygen of the spirit: love.

EMOTIONAL CARDIO

Love requires connection between lover and beloved, and empathy is the quiet miracle by which this connection is forged. When you share others' suffering, you also share their experience of receiving your gift—the gift of being accompanied into grief or anguish rather than bearing it alone. Naturally, almost involuntarily, people will love you for this. If you're in a state of empathy, you'll feel their love for you as your own emotion, thus coming to understand what it means to love yourself. This will make you love the other person even more, and of course you'll receive that love even as you give it, which makes it even deeper, and...well, you can see where this is going. Become an expert at it, and soon your life will be absolutely lousy with love.

I know one wise old man who has been working at empathy every day since becoming a meditation master early in his life. He matter-of-factly describes a state of complete empathic fitness as a “continuous emotional orgasm.” Who’s with me now? All right, then. Let’s talk about your exciting new cardio workout—but first, a crucial warning.

CAVEAT EMPATHOR

Many people, especially those of us who’ve had a little bit of therapy, fall into an emotional trap Buddhists call “idiot compassion.” At first glance, this looks like empathy, but it’s actually projection. It encourages us to condone harmful behavior by assuming that the perpetrator is acting out of pain and helplessness.

“I know he’s just a hurting little boy inside,” says Jeanie, whose boyfriend, Hank, has just beaten the living tar out of her for the umpteenth time. “He’s so sensitive. His mama abandoned him. He even cries when he talks about it.” Because Jeanie herself would become violent only in the grip of intolerable torment, she thinks she understands Hank’s motivations—and so she excuses his behavior. Real empathy is not based on this kind of projection but on close observation. If she were a true empath, Jeanie would notice that Hank, while “so sensitive” to his own misery, never notices others’ distress.

When Jeanie understands that no one who cares for her could act as he acts, she’ll drop the idiot compassion and get the hell out of Dodge. At that point, she’ll realize that real empathy doesn’t put us in harm’s way. It protects us. That’s just another reason to implement one of the following exercises:

EXERCISE 1: LEARNING TO LISTEN

If you want to feel that you belong in the world, a family, or any relationship, you must tell your story. But if you want to see into the hearts of other beings, your first task is to hear their stories. Many people are gifted storytellers. Only the empathic are true storyhearers.

To become one of these people, start with conversation. Once a day, ask a friend, “How are you?” in a way that says you mean it. If they give you a stock answer (“Fine”), repeat the question: “No, really. How are you?”

You'll soon realize that if your purpose is solely to understand, rather than to advise or protect, you can work a kind of magic: In the warmth of genuine caring, people open up like flowers. You'll be amazed by the stories you'll hear when you use this simple strategy with your children, your next-door neighbor, your aunt Flossie. You'll learn things you never knew you never knew.

Even if you're not in the company of people, you can work to increase your storyhearing techniques. Here's a snippet from English teacher Jane Juska's wonderful memoir, *A Round-Heeled Woman*, in which she describes teaching creative writing to prisoners in San Quentin:

Suddenly Steve, silent until now, speaks: "...when we used to have a really fine librarian here, he gave me this book. It was *Les Misérables*.... That book changed my life. It gave me feelings, gave me empathy...*Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo." He is wrapping up this gift and holding it close. It is his forever.

Books, movies, songs—stories told in any artistic medium can give you an empathy workout. To grow stronger, find stories that are unfamiliar. If you read, watch, or hear only things you know well, you're looking for validation, not an expansion of empathy. There's nothing wrong with that, but to achieve high levels of fitness, focus once a week on the story of someone who seems utterly different from you.

EXERCISE 2: REVERSE ENGINEERING

Some mechanical engineers spend their time disassembling machines to see how they were originally put together. You can use a similar technique to develop empathy, by working backward from the observable effects of emotion to the emotion itself.

Think of someone you'd like to understand—your enigmatic boss, your distant mother, the romantic interest who may or may not return your affections. Remember a recent interaction you had with this person—especially one that left you baffled as to how they were really feeling. Now imitate, as closely as you can, the physical posture, facial expression, exact words, and vocal inflection they used during that encounter. Notice what emotions arise within you.

What you feel will probably be very close to whatever the other person was going through. For example, when I “reverse engineer” the behavior of people I experience as critical or aloof, I usually find myself flooded with feelings of shyness, shame, or fear. It’s a lesson that has saved me no end of worry and defensiveness.

I train life coaches to use reverse engineering in real time, by subtly matching clients’ body language, vocal tone, even breathing rate. It’s so effective that clients often think the coach must be psychic—how else could anyone “get them” so quickly and completely? Elementary, my dear Watson. The body shapes itself in response to emotion, and shaping one’s own body to match someone else’s is a quick ticket to empathy.

EXERCISE 3: SHAPE-SHIFTING

In folklore, shape-shifters are beings with the ability to become anyone or anything. As a child, I was fascinated by this concept, and used to pretend that I could instantaneously switch places with other people, animals, even inanimate objects. What if I woke up one morning in the body—and the life—of my best friend, or a bank robber, or the president? What if, like Kafka’s fictional Gregor, I suddenly became a cockroach? (You could find people who think I’ve actually done this.) My point is, what would it feel like to be them? How would I cope? What would I do next?

I still play this game, especially in public places. I recommend you try it, soon. See that strange man in the orange polyester suit putting 37 packets of sweetener into his extra-grande mochaccino with soy milk? What if—zap!—you suddenly switched bodies with him? What would it be like to wear that suit, that face, that physique? What impulse would lead to sugaring a cup of coffee like that, let alone drinking it?

I can feel this shape-shifting developing my empathy. It gives my heart a stretch, makes me entertain unfamiliar thoughts and feelings, leaves me with the sensation that I’ve completed a stomp session on an emotional StairMaster. And if I want to ramp up my workout, it’s just a short hop to some practices that work even better, and have been tested for centuries.

EXERCISE 4: METTA-TATION

World-class empathizers like my friend the meditation master (he of the continuous emotional orgasm) conduct a daily regimen of metta, or lovingkindness, meditation. This involves focusing all of one's attention on a certain individual and offering loving wishes to that person with each breath you take, for several minutes at a time.

Classic metta practice starts with your own sweet self. For five minutes, with each breath, offer yourself kind thoughts (May I be happy, may I feel joy, etc.). Taking these few minutes every day can put you on the road to complete, uncritical acceptance—the foundation on which all empathy is based. (Reaching that point, admittedly, takes years for most of us incomplete and self-critical people.)

Then switch the focus of your kind thoughts onto a friend or family member. When you feel a sense of emotional union with that person, target someone you barely know. As a final, black-belt exercise, project metta thoughts onto one of your worst enemies until you can begin to feel for them. Don't rush this process, or (God forbid) fake it. You'll only become a saccharine pseudo-empathizer, wearing the plastic smile of a fitness model from Neptune.

THE PAYOFF

The thing about cardio is that once you get used to it, you can feel it making you stronger, calming you down, improving your quality of life. Regular empathy practice keeps you on the edge of your emotional fitness, but the benefits are enormous: an awareness of union that banishes loneliness, a natural ability to connect and relate to others, protection from idiot compassion, a wider, deeper life. As your empathy grows, you'll find that it's infinite and that through it, you transcend your isolation and find yourself at home in the universe. I promise, it'll do your heart good.