Empathy Gone Awry

Empathy is a crucial social skill. It is the capacity to put oneself in another person’s shoes and imagine what they are feeling. It fosters understanding and compassion and is a building block of intimacy. However, sometimes when we aim to put ourselves in another person’s shoes, we not only imagine what that person might be feeling, but also project how we might want to be responded to in that situation. For example, if you really need a hug when you are feeling sad, you might use your empathy to see that your loved one is sad. However, the assumption that they want/need a hug may be a projection of what you would need, but it is not necessarily what they may need. We all experience a range of emotions, from joy to despair and every feeling in between. Yet how we individually want to deal with these feelings vary greatly. If we assume that everyone we meet needs the same response we do, we may end up actually reacting to that person in the wrong way. Thus, in our attempt to empathize, we may in fact push another person away. A person may want advice, or a hug, or to be left alone, or distraction, or humor, or just to be heard and listened to. If we project our own “needs” we may not be open to what the other person needs. Ultimately, we may end up feeling hurt and rejected because our attempt to comfort is not well received. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the people you love and to accept and understand how they like their strong feelings to be handled. Empathizing without projections means this: Even if you need hugs and long talks when you are upset, you realize that what another person needs may space and time to reflect. You may need to just back off and give them the time they need. If you are unsure of what a person needs, the best way to handle it is to identify what they feel and ask what they need, for example “Hey, you must be really frustrated by work and I’m really sorry. Could you use a hug? Do you want to talk about it or just watch a movie and try to forget about it? Or do you really just need some time alone?” In this way, you are using empathy in a way that will enhance your relationship and not in a way that may end up with the other person feeling even more upset and you feeling rebuffed.

“for there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.”

― [Milan Kundera](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6343.Milan_Kundera)