

Am I an Empath?

Empaths are super-sensitive people who soak up the emotions of others around them.

By [Lisa Esposito](#), Staff Writer Dec. 19, 2018



Empathy exists on a spectrum. (GETTY IMAGES)

WE CAN ALL GAUGE emotions of other people, at least to a certain point. Whether it's a partner slamming the door or a co-worker humming in her cubicle, emotional clues are obvious. Empaths, however, are far more deeply attuned to unspoken moods of those they encounter. They're super-sensitive to subtle energies surrounding them. Empaths don't just recognize others' feelings – they absorb them.

"It's very strong intuition," says Dr. Judith Orloff, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA. Empaths enjoy many advantages. "You can have strong connections with people and love deeply," she says. "You value friendships and relationships. You love nature. You can give to others, help others and make a contribution to the world. You really enjoy that. That's part

of your spirit and your nature," according to Orloff, author of the "The Empath's Survival Guide: Life Strategies for Sensitive People," published in 2017.

Orloff, who is an empath herself, leads an online support community with more than 13,000 members. Several shared their perspectives on life as an empath with U.S. News. Excerpts from their written responses include:

What I like about being an empath is helping people and the gifts that come along with it, such as having insight about people or certain situations. I'm an emotional empath, which means that I absorb other people's emotions, whether they are happy or depressed. Sometimes it is challenging to differentiate if those emotions are mine or if they belong to someone else – it is a work in progress that I have not mastered yet. –Merna Coote, Reiki master practitioner, Atlanta

Could You Be an Empath?

Many people are empathetic but few are empaths. Empathy exists on a spectrum, Orloff says. "Midway is for beautiful people who show empathy and feel for somebody if they have joy or if they have pain," she says. "But if you go higher up on the spectrum, you have empaths, who are highly empathic. They not only feel what's going on – they're an emotional sponge to absorb what's going on in others or the world into their own body. So they suffer from exhaustion, or overload, or depression or anxiety."

A quiz in Orloff's book can indicate whether you're an empath. She offers a few sample questions:

- Have I ever been labeled overly sensitive, shy or introverted?
- Do arguments and yelling make me ill?
- Do crowds drain me and do I need alone time to revive myself?
- Do I absorb other people's stress, emotions or symptoms?
- Do I replenish myself in nature?
- Do I need a long time to recuperate after being with difficult people or emotional vampires?

The Empath Experience

Empaths sometimes need a space to retreat. That could be at home or in the great outdoors.

*I most enjoy my deep connection with God, animals and nature. (Most challenging) is the need to shield, ground and guard myself from others' energy – especially those with impure motives. Daily walks in **nature** and interacting with animals help to purge negative energy and restore balance in my life. (As empaths) we require more alone time than most people in order to recharge. There are some people we cannot be around at all. –Ann Mayer, Pagosa Springs, Colorado*

Crowds – like those in a packed stadium for a football game – can be too **stressful** for empaths. An empath might need to make an early getaway from a noisy holiday party. However, empaths often enjoy socializing with smaller groups of friends. "I don't like big concerts but I do like having two or three people over for dinner," Orloff says.

Because empaths possess a different sensibility, Orloff says, they can be misunderstood. They flourish when "they can develop their intuition, their creativity, their desire for alone time and their deep capacity to love and be great partners in relationships."

If you're an empath, Orloff says, "You tend to be spiritual and long for a greater connection than connection to oneself." Empaths have "a desire to unite humanity rather than divide."

Empathic Occupations

Being an empath is critical to my work as a mental health professional in New York City, where I am called to bond and relate to a diverse population. It draws out intuition, compassion and understanding from both verbal and nonverbal cues that play out in psychotherapy. (As an empath) I cope with meditation to center my energy and focus. I use music as a way of releasing energy that I may have absorbed. –Shreya Mandal, licensed psychotherapist

Choosing **work** that meshes with their strengths is important for empaths. "They often don't do well with office politics," Orloff says. Empaths are frequently attracted to healing professions. Occupations that foster creativity are also good fits: Many actors and writers are empaths, she notes.

When career choices clash with their vulnerabilities, empaths find workarounds:

Sales is at the top of Dr. Orloff's list of jobs to avoid, and I've been doing this high-intensity job for 25 years. I'm also an introvert, so I guess I enjoy a

challenge! Because my demanding job entails making presentations to C-level executives (CEOs and other corporate chiefs), traveling often and being "on" for multiple days at a time, when I return from the road I go into undercover mode for several days, employing as much self-care as I can to restore myself. ... I actually feel sensory overload and need to decompress. I flirt with burnout very often. Meditation has been a lifesaver for me in this career.

However, because I can read the energy in a room, I can sense the unseen and the unsaid, which helps me to better know how to communicate what people need to hear. When properly understood and managed, being an empath is a superpower. –Cathy Vergara, global account director for an event marketing agency, Chicago area

Women make up more than 90 percent of Orloff's Facebook support group. When the subject of male empaths comes up, Orloff says, men explain that they've been shamed, shunned and criticized for their sensitivity, and it's just too hard to come out publicly.

"Young boys who are empaths have a terrible time in the school system," Orloff says. "Because they don't like video games. They don't like sporting events. They like going out into the forest, and they like poetry and being with one best friend."

Empaths and Narcissists

If you've ever spent time on a support group forum for empaths you'll notice that many of us have had a narcissistic parent and have experienced much abuse in childhood. ... True empaths who have been attracted to narcissists may partially be attracted because we are trying to unconsciously work things out with the abusive, narcissistic parent of the past – but much of the attraction is to the damaged child that lives within the narcissist. –Asha Brewer, massage therapist

"Empaths are highly attracted to people who are different than they are – for instance, people with narcissistic personality disorder," says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. "They're like yin and yang: The person who doesn't have any sensitivity to the feelings or needs of others, and the person who has too much."

Relationship dynamics like these can be a tipoff that a client is an empath, says Gadhia-Smith, author of "How to Heal Emotional Trauma: 7 Keys to

Finding Freedom and Self-Worth," published in 2018. "You can also feel the spirit of the empath," she adds. "It can be very loving, sweet and caring. They're always concerned about other people. They're generally very nice people. The problem for them, though, is sometimes they're too nice."

When an empath seeks therapy with her, Gadhia-Smith says, most often it's from experiencing a [malignant narcissist's](#) psychological or emotional abuse. "It's hard for them to get out of that abusive cycle once they are in it," she says. "Because the empath is wired to love, help and fix. And the narcissist is wired to control, [manipulate](#) and be an emotional predator. That dynamic can go on for a very long time until the empath is really well-educated and treated and understands what they're dealing with."

Ultimately, resilience can help empaths emerge healthier. "They end up being much stronger than the narcissist, because the majority of malignant narcissists have a very difficult time experiencing growth and change," Gadhia-Smith say. "So they're stuck – while if the empath seeks help, they will often grow into a wonderful new self and a wonderful new life."

Empaths and Energy Medicine

Although there's a good deal of research on empathy, it's difficult to locate studies focused directly on empaths. In her book, Orloff touches on related scientific theories and findings.

Empaths may have highly responsive mirror neurons, a group of brain cells responsible for compassion. Empaths may be especially sensitive to electromagnetic fields generated by the brain and heart. Emotional contagion may influence an empath's response. In this common phenomenon, people "catch" the emotions of others around them, such as in an enthusiastic crowd.

Introverted empaths could be more sensitive to the brain-released chemical called dopamine, which relates to the ability to feel pleasure. Empaths may require less external stimulation from large groups of people to feel happy.

In a neurological condition called synesthesia, two different senses are paired in the brain. With mirror-touch synesthesia, people experience sensations and emotions of other people in their own bodies.

Energy therapies can help empaths cope. Energy medicine focuses on healing imbalances in a person's energy field, or biofield, believed to exist

within and around the body. Energy therapies include [acupuncture](#), magnet therapy, Qigong, meditation and [Reiki](#).

If you're an empath, try practicing techniques like boundary-setting, Orloff says: "Learn how to say no instead of yes to everything."

We are kind, loving, nurturing and some of the greatest people you will meet. Sometimes we get overwhelmed – even I as an extroverted empath – after dealing with too many people or too much all day, so we need time alone to rejuvenate and recharge ourselves. Everything is energy – people, colors, things, music, places – and as an empath we are open to feeling it all. That is exhausting. –Barbara Benton, San Jose, California