

How Do We Increase Empathy?

February 06, 2015

The New York Times:

In my last column, I wrote about a high school buddy, Kevin Green, a warm and helpful man who floundered in a tough job market, hurt his back and died at the age of 54. The column was a call for empathy for those who are struggling, but, predictably, scolds complained that Kevin's problems were of his own making.

Grrrr.

So what do we know about empathy and how to nurture it?

First, it seems hard-wired. Even laboratory rats will sometimes free a trapped companion before munching on a food treat.

“Probably the biggest empathy generator is cuteness: pedomorphic features such as large eyes, a large head, and a small lower face,” Steven Pinker, the Harvard psychologist, tells me. “Professional empathy entrepreneurs have long known this, of course, which is why so many charities feature photos of children and why so many conservation organizations feature pandas. Prettier children are more likely to be adopted, and baby-faced defendants get lighter sentences.”

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There's also some research suggesting that wealth may impede empathy. One study by psychologists at the University of California at Berkeley finds that drivers of luxury cars are more likely to cut off other motorists and ignore pedestrians at a crosswalk. Likewise, heart rates of wealthier research subjects are less affected when they watch a video of children with cancer.

Granted, skepticism is reasonable any time (mostly liberal) academics reach conclusions that portray the wealthy in a poor light. But these experiments also find a measure of backing in the real world. For example, among Democratic politicians, personal wealth is a predictor of supporting legislation that would increase inequality, according to a journal article last year by Michael W. Kraus and Bennett Callaghan.

Read the whole story: [The New York Times](#)