

Can Empathy Make You Sick?

Male & Female Responses to Sensitivity

By Mara Bishop, MS, ThM, CSC

The short answer is yes, the absorption of other's emotions can make you sick. In my practice, though, I have seen that this energetic overload may well take a different form in women than in men.

Since I often work with clients on an energetic level, you might not expect gender differences to play a part. However, our physical and spiritual bodies are interrelated, and our genetics, families of origin, and expectations of society at large affect us differently, depending on whether we grew up male or female. Those differences affect us on many levels, including the energetic.

One difference I frequently see between men and women is in the way they handle their own sensitivity to others and their environment. This relates particularly to the concept of empathy. Merriam-Webster defines empathy as: "The feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings," and "The intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts or attitudes of another."

Both definitions contain two parts. The first is understanding another's emotional state. The second is absorption, or actual experience, of their emotions. Although they are linked as variants of one experience, they are quite different in the way they affect our bodies.

Being compassionate and wishing to alleviate the suffering of others is, of course, good. (Merriam-Webster defines compassion as "sympathetic of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.") Genuine care and concern benefit both individuals and the community as a whole. However, there is little value in experiencing another person's pain in your body. It makes it more difficult to be of assistance, emotionally or practically. Two suffering souls do not make the load lighter. Too much empathy can cause the absorption of other's emotions. Those emotions can convert to toxic energy and be stored in the body.

This produces a variety of stress responses affecting physical, emotional, and spiritual health. When people hold too much of this energy they can become depressed or anxious. They often develop some of the physical symptoms that accompany stress, such as headaches, gastrointestinal issues, or chronic muscle aches and pains. Essentially, too much empathy can make you sick.

These patterns begin in childhood. When girls absorb the emotions of those around them, a variety of patterns play out. For instance, girls may become instinctual caretakers or develop vulnerability to others with poor boundaries.

When these patterns persist, women often wind up exhausted. Their inner resources are drained by those around them. Once drained, their energetic immune system starts to break down.

On the other hand, when boys absorb the emotions of those around them, other patterns are more common. They start to buffer themselves energetically. They withdraw. They shut down emotionally. Their relationships become challenging, because their response to feeling their energetic environment too intensely is to put on a metaphorical hazmat suit. It's effective for shutting out the world, but not so effective for having nuanced, intimate relationships.

Although the initial response is different, the result is often similar for both genders. At a certain point in adulthood, both men and women realize that something is dramatically amiss. Those that find me are looking to reengage the world. This can be a scary prospect for them as sensitive beings whose spiritual skin has been rubbed raw.

My job is to create a safe space for my clients within which to re-inhabit themselves and re-engage in relationships. Typically, we gently peel away the accumulation

of energetic buildup that prevents a person from experiencing himself or herself free of anyone else's energy. Then we call back the spiritual parts that disconnected when times got too painful.

Each client's experience is unique. However, for men, this process is more likely to involve opening up to other people and expanding their borders, while for women, it is often about shoring up their energetic boundaries, so all their energy isn't flowing outward.

Differentiating compassion from empathy is important in how we navigate our spiritual surroundings, our energy ecosystem. In all our relationships compassion is a healthy approach, but being empathic, especially when we do not have good awareness and control of our energetic borders, can make us sick. ❧❧❧



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