

development  
of soft  
competences  
of young  
people

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## Introduction

### Empathy

Empathy is the ability to comprehend and share the feelings of others. It is one of the most basic yet powerful abilities a person will acquire. In the simplest words, empathy is the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes to understand another person's emotions, perspectives, and experiences. It consists of a cognitive and emotional component: cognitive refers to the ability to process and comprehend information about other people's experiences. In contrast, emotional means the ability to feel what others are feeling. According to psychologist Daniel Goleman, empathy is believed to be one of the five critical components of emotional intelligence.

Empathy is developed during the second and third year of life<sup>1</sup> and social interaction is essential in developing this skill. During this time, children start to understand emotions, and later on, they learn perspective-taking. One of the primary contributors to the formation of empathy is early childhood experiences, particularly the quality of attachment formed with caregivers. Children who receive warmth, responsiveness, and emotional support from their caregivers tend to develop a strong foundation for empathy. Through these interactions, they learn to recognise and respond to the emotional cues of others, laying the groundwork for empathetic behaviour later in life.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3021497/>

Additionally, socialisation plays a crucial role in shaping empathy. As individuals navigate social environments, they observe and internalise societal norms, values, and expectations regarding empathy and compassion. They learn through direct instruction and observation of other people's behaviour, gradually developing their ability to understand and empathise with diverse perspectives.

Moreover, neurobiological factors contribute to the development of empathy. Neuroscience research has shown that specific structures located in the brain, such as the prefrontal cortex and mirror neurons, play pivotal roles in empathetic processing. These regions enable individuals to simulate and comprehend the emotions of others, facilitating empathetic responses.

Empathy holds profound significance in a person's life, enriching relationships, fostering emotional intelligence, and promoting social cohesion.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the most essential soft skills a person will acquire during their lifetime, because at its core, empathy cultivates meaningful connections by fostering mutual understanding and support.

2. Silke, C., Brady, B., Boylan, C., & Dolan, P. (2018). Factors influencing the development of empathy and pro-social behaviour among adolescents: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 94, 421-436.

When individuals empathise with one another, they validate each other's experiences, feelings, and perspectives, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Moreover, empathy is also believed to be “a powerful communication skill that is often misunderstood and underused”<sup>3</sup> instrumental in navigating conflicts and resolving interpersonal issues. By empathising with others' emotions and motivations, individuals can approach disagreements with compassion and openness, seeking mutually beneficial solutions rather than resorting to hostility or indifference. Individuals high in empathy exhibit greater emotional awareness and regulation, enabling them to navigate complex social dynamics with grace and empathy, which is essential in personal and professional settings.

Empathy catalyses positive social change and collective action in a broader societal context. By empathising with marginalised groups and understanding their struggles, individuals are motivated to advocate for justice, equality, and inclusivity.

Empathy for others is essential, but empathy for oneself is crucial for mental and emotional well-being.

3 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5571783/>

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By extending the same level of understanding and compassion to oneself as one would to others, individuals can cultivate a sense of authenticity and emotional balance in their lives. It involves treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and compassion, especially during challenges or self-doubt. When individuals practise self-empathy, they acknowledge their feelings and experiences without judgement, fostering a sense of self-acceptance and inner peace.

Moreover, self-empathy enables individuals to recognise their own needs and boundaries, allowing them to prioritise self-care and maintain healthy relationships with others. It serves as a protective factor against stress, anxiety, and depression, empowering individuals to navigate life's challenges with resilience and self-assurance.

What is important to mention is that empathy for others and empathy for self are skills that can be trained and developed effectively. That is why the 'Growth and Art' workshop focuses on understanding other people and developing self-empathy - being kind and understanding to oneself. The first part of the workshop, which focuses on the psychology behind empathy, has been divided into two parts according to their main focus: empathy for self and empathy for others.

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In the first part of the workshops, there is more focus on understanding one's feelings, communicating emotions, confronting fears and overcoming them, while in the second part of the workshop, the focus is on understanding other people's perspectives and cooperating with them. The main idea behind the workshops presented here is that working on one's emotions and cognitions is a work in progress. Still, small changes implemented regularly can result in significant improvements in functioning over time.

## **Competencies necessary for conducting the workshop**

The workshop on empathy is designed for educators who are passionate about fostering emotional intelligence and promoting healthy social interactions among adolescents. Ideal facilitators have experience working with teenagers in diverse settings. Competencies<sup>3</sup> required include:

1. **Understanding of Empathy:** Facilitators should get acquainted with the concept of empathy, including its cognitive and emotional components, as well as its significance in personal and social development.
2. **Communication Skills:** Effective communication skills are essential for guiding participants through reflective exercises and facilitating group discussions. Facilitators should be adept at creating a safe and inclusive environment where students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions.
3. **Empathy for Self and Others:** Facilitators should embody empathy in their interactions with participants, demonstrating compassion, active listening, and respect for diverse perspectives. They should also model self-empathy by fostering a non-judgmental attitude towards themselves and others.



## **Competencies necessary for conducting the workshop**

4. **Flexibility and Adaptability:** The ability to adapt the workshop content and activities based on each group's unique dynamics and needs is essential. Facilitators should be flexible in their approach, open to feedback, and willing to modify plans to ensure participants' optimal learning<sup>3</sup> experience. By possessing these competencies, workshop facilitators can effectively guide participants through self-discovery, empathy-building, and personal growth.

## Ethics for educators<sup>4</sup>

- **Confidentiality:** Teachers should ensure that any personal information shared by students during the workshop remains confidential unless there's a risk of harm to themselves or others.
- **Respect for Diversity:** Educators should value and respect the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of all participants, creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment.
- **Professional Boundaries:** Teachers should maintain appropriate professional boundaries with students, avoiding behaviour that could be perceived as crossing those boundaries.
- **Integrity:** Educators should conduct themselves with honesty and integrity, adhering to ethical principles and standards in all interactions with students and colleagues.
- **Empathy and Compassion:** Teachers should demonstrate empathy and compassion toward students, understanding their challenges and supporting their personal and academic growth.
- **Non-Discrimination:** Educators should not discriminate against students based on factors such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or disability, ensuring equal opportunities for all.
- **Duty of Care:** Teachers have to ensure students' physical and emotional safety and well-being during the workshop, taking appropriate action if any concerns arise.

## Target group

The workshop is tailored for adolescents aged 15 to 18, a pivotal stage of development characterised by significant physical, emotional, and cognitive changes.<sup>5</sup> Adolescents are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, grappling with identity, autonomy, and social belonging issues.

What's distinctive about adolescents in this age group is their heightened sensitivity to peer influence, quest for independence, and exploration of personal values and beliefs—specifically, many exercises in the workshop focus on peer importance and identity formation. Participants have time for introspection and to get in touch with their own emotions, providing room to share these feelings with their peers, be vulnerable, and learn from one another. This experiential approach differs from traditional learning contexts, where the teacher often delivers information. Through conducting these exercises, adolescents grow their skill of empathy, promoting a deeper understanding of themselves and others.

<sup>5</sup> Sebastian, C., Burnett, S., & Blakemore, S. J. (2008). Development of the self-concept during adolescence. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 12(11), 441-446.

<sup>6</sup> Allemand, M., Steiger, A. E., & Fend, H. A. (2015). Empathy development in adolescence predicts social competencies in adulthood. *Journal of personality*, 83(2), 229-241.

## **Target group**

Adolescents are navigating complex social dynamics, including friendships, romantic relationships, and peer pressure while facing academic demands and potential stressors related to family and societal expectations. Moreover, adolescents often grapple with self-esteem, identity formation, and emotional regulation issues as they strive to establish their place in the world.

Understanding adolescents' unique challenges and opportunities is crucial for designing effective interventions and support systems that promote their holistic development. The workshop recognises the developmental needs and characteristics of adolescents aged 15 to 18, offering tailored strategies and resources to enhance their emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and resilience during this formative stage.

## The Science Behind the Help of Art

**Art therapy** is a form of expressive therapy that involves creating art to improve mental and emotional well-being. This has been studied extensively and shown to have positive effects on reducing stress and anxiety.<sup>7</sup>

Research has demonstrated that people who engage in artistic activities such as painting, drawing, sculpting, and crafting can lower cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and promote relaxation.<sup>8</sup> Also, art therapy has been found to help with self-expression and increase self-esteem, which contributes to better stress management.

Moreover, getting involved in art-based activities can help individuals deal with different kinds of stress, for example, long-term illnesses, harrowing experiences, or mental health challenges. How people react to art therapy can differ, but according to science, it is beneficial at helping with stress and making an individual feel better overall.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6949689/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/06/160615134946.htm>

## How Art is implemented in life

Art is all around us affecting our day to day experiences. Here, we can see how art mixes in with everything else, making life more enjoyable:

1. Artistic expressions like paintings, sculptures, photographs that decorate our homes, public spaces and galleries **provide aesthetic pleasure and enhance the atmosphere of our surroundings.**
2. **Art serves as a medium for individuals to express their emotions, thoughts, and experiences.** Artists convey complex feelings and ideas through various forms, such as music, literature, and visual arts, fostering empathy and connection among people.
3. Many artists use their work to address social and political issues, **sparking dialogue and raising awareness about important topics such as inequality, injustice, and environmental concerns.**
4. Engaging with art can **be a transformative experience, encouraging self-reflection and personal growth.** Creating art can be therapeutic, allowing individuals to explore their creativity, confront challenges, and develop new skills.
5. **Art therapy has proven effective in promoting healing and well-being, particularly in healthcare settings.** It helps patients cope with stress, trauma, and illness, fostering emotional resilience and improving quality of life.

## Conclusion

The workshop "Growth and Art" illustrated art's profound importance in cultivating essential soft skills and fostering empathy towards oneself and others. Through engaging in artistic practices, individuals hone their creativity and critical thinking and develop a profound understanding of emotions, perspectives and self-development.

Art is a powerful tool for self-discovery, self-expression, and self-reflection, enabling participants to explore their inner thoughts and feelings in a safe and supportive environment. The "Growth and Art" workshop enabled the participants to learn, explore and strengthen competencies in empathy towards themselves, empathy towards others and overall stress management through art. A wide range of exercises were conducted to foster and facilitate the learning experience and to create a safe environment for everyone to feel comfortable and open to explore. The skills acquired during the workshop are crucial to be well adapted and prepared for modern days challenges.

Empathy serves as a foundational element in various aspects of human life. It enhances emotional intelligence, promotes resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving skills. In addition, the practice of empathy, both in creating art and in appreciating the artistic expressions of others, plays a crucial role in building meaningful connections and fostering community.

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Empathy towards oneself lays the foundation for self-compassion and resilience. Self-compassion enables participants to acknowledge their flaws and practice gentleness and kindness towards themselves. Self-acceptance is fostered as different facets of each participant are stimulated through the exercises leading to acceptance and ultimately authenticity while accepting one's imperfections. By acknowledging one's emotions and vulnerabilities, individuals can strengthen self-compassion towards oneself. These are essential skills to navigate life with greater emotional intelligence and a growth mindset.

On the other hand, cultivating empathy towards others fosters a more profound understanding of building collaborative relationships. Empathetic individuals are attuned to the needs and feelings of others, fostering a sense of trust and mutual respect within interactions with other people. It enhances interpersonal relationships with others as participants learn to understand and resonate with the feelings of others. Empathy towards others challenges us to consider the impact of our actions on others, ultimately guiding the participants towards action benefitting not only themselves.

Art is a powerful tool targeting stress management especially in today's fast-paced world. Expressing emotions, collaborating in teams, introspecting in order to gain insight and generating ideas are benefits gained from engaging in art practices.



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Through various art forms such as creating collages, painting and crafting individuals could effectively alleviate stress and foster inner peace and balance. In the act of creation people escape pressures of daily life duties and act out mindfulness and self-awareness. Engaging in artistic practices fosters mindfulness and being present in the moment. Psychological stressors are reduced while engaging in art as it stimulates neurochemicals in the brain promoting joyfulness and happiness. Moreover, incorporating artistic activities in one's life has been shown to reduce cortisol levels, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety and contribute to one's overall well-being.

Mastering empathy is more than a valuable soft skill. It is a transformative mindset fostering kindness and inclusivity, ultimately nurturing a flourishing community. It enables individuals to navigate diverse perspectives, bridge cultural differences, and collaborate towards common goals. Embracing artistic practices enables growth and reflection and lays the foundation for a more compassionate understanding in the world. By embracing art as a pathway for developing soft skills and empathy, participants enrich their lives and contribute positively to humanity's collective well-being.

Nurturing workshops that implement art and empathy practices is crucial, as well-being, personal growth as well as a sense of building community and relationships with each other is fostered.

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In this workshop, a dynamic framework that empowers participants to embrace learning opportunities, engage in self-reflection and explore new practices to expand their horizon was mediated by art and empathy.

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## Sources

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