

EEP 129- Anita Nowak: How to Engage in Purposeful Empathy Whenever You Need It

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

empathy, people, psychedelics, purposeful, loving kindness, moment, anita, feel, therapy, book, world, empathic, called, thesis advisor, dots, connected, opportunity, social entrepreneurs, step, bodies

SPEAKERS

Maria Ross, Anita Nowak

Anita Nowak 00:00

I think we need to engage empathy on purpose. I don't think it's enough that we just have the capacity to empathize. And in the moment when somebody's telling us a point in story, we feel a resonance with them. Our mirror neurons are firing, we're feeling affective empathy. I think when it comes to the way we design our world, the way we design public policy, the way that we think about foreign aid the way we think about how we treat each other and our families and our relationships across political divides, that we need to engage in empathy on purpose.

Maria Ross 01:18

You don't have to wait for empathy to strike. You can intentionally choose to engage in what my guest today calls purposeful empathy to change the dynamic of any interaction. But how and how do you maintain your own boundaries when being empathic as part of your job? Anita Novak is my delightful guest today to talk about her forthcoming book, purposeful empathy, tapping our hidden superpower for personal organizational and social change. It's coming in April 2023. But it's available for pre order now. I need a Novak is a PhD passionate about leveraging empathy for personal organizational and social transformation. She is also dedicated to teaching and mentoring the next generation of changemakers. Anita is a two-time TEDx speaker, host of the purposeful empathy podcast and YouTube series, both dedicated to amplifying the voices of people from around the globe, who understand the world needs more empathy, and are doing something about it. Anita teaches leadership, ethics and management and Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation at McGill University. As a certified personal and professional coach. She also helps purpose driven leaders and organizations create cultures of empathy through her boutique advisory firm, purposeful empathy by design. Anita also advises High Net Worth families to translate their philanthropic goals into social impact. Today, Anita shares what purposeful empathy is, and how and when to engage it, and even how to step back and reclaim your boundaries when empathy could burn you out. We both share personal stories of when we've actively chosen empathy in a tough situation, and how it transformed the exchange. We discussed the physiological changes to our bodies that occur when we're engaged in empathy, and how and pathogens or certain psychedelics that have been shown to increase empathy could be applied for

therapeutic treatments to heal trauma control, aggression, or other instances where human connection can be challenging. This was such a delicious conversation to have hope you enjoy it.

Maria Ross 03:37

Welcome Anita Nowak to the empathy edge podcast. This interview has been a long time coming. Welcome.

Anita Nowak 03:44

Thank you so much, Maria. I'm so happy to be here.

Maria Ross 03:47

So, you and I are fellow empathy activists, empathy advocates, whatever we call ourselves on a given day. And I'm so excited for you to talk about purposeful empathy, your book that will be coming out, which will be coming out in April 2023, but will be available for preorder anyone interested after they hear this wonderful conversation? Tell us a little bit. You know, we heard about all your accolades and your and your, your roles. Tell us a little bit about how you came to this work. What What's your story?

Anita Nowak 04:20

Yeah, the origin story, I can thank my thesis advisor, I was doing my PhD on one topic, and moonlighting as a professional fundraiser. And I was head hunted to take on a new mandate and raise funds for girls' education, which was exciting. And I said to my thesis advisor that I needed a year off off from my PhD and he said, please don't do that. Like you'll never finish and I said, No, no, no, I will. He's like, no, this is when everybody drops off the bandwagon. Anyways, he had me in his office six months later, and I didn't come in with any agenda. He said, what's new, and I told him that this would place this actually in the spring of 2008. And that summer, I was going to go to Kigali, Rwanda to work with a women's collective, all 400 genocide survivors and help them raise my launch of microfinance project, essentially. And I was really excited. And I was telling Michael all about this. And he stopped me and he said, you're lit up like a Christmas tree. And the only way you're going to finish your thesis is if you actually are as passionate about your topic as you are about this trip you're taking. So, he gave me advice, he told me to go home and find the box or the file or the folder that I keep stashing stuff into. He's like, go find it, and then explore what's there and come back to me with your real passion. And I walked out of his office, really irate thinking, how dare he question my passion about my topic, right. But I actually had to do a filing cabinet, a metal, an old-fashioned metal, metal filing cabinet, and I rifled through it and I came across a miscellaneous file that I didn't know that I had, even though it was my handwriting. And I spread the contents, and I discovered all sorts of clippings. And, you know, I had been to a few different speakers' events, and I couldn't make sense of it until I came across one little article about a boy in elementary school who decided to go to school for an entire week without shoes, because he'd learned about childhood poverty wanted to know what that felt like and wanted to educate his classmates. Oh my gosh, right. And that's when I started to notice the common theme across all the little doodads that I had, which was I was attracted to people who were trying to learn about others step into their shoes and create positive change as a result. And the word social entrepreneurship was not part of my vocabulary. But I discovered my peeps, as soon as I discovered, oh, there's this change making group called social entrepreneurs, social innovators, let me understand those better. So, I ended up doing dozens of interviews about with social entrepreneurs about their lives. And I asked them the same standard questions, including their backstory, like you've just asked me. And one of the

things that came up, like across the board, with no exception, was the reason they decided to become social entrepreneurs and pursue the work that they did, when they had a lot of other opportunities. These are all talented, gifted, hardworking entrepreneurs. But the reason they were driven to do the work that they did was because they felt a sense of empathy for others, and a need to act on that empathy. So, I have fallen in love with empathy as a driver for social change since then, that's the backstory.

Maria Ross 07:34

Wow, wow, that's amazing. And like, you know, it's often the people that make us the most irate in our lives, that brings us the epiphanies. So, kudos to your professor, for putting you on this path. So tell us a little bit about what you mean, and why you titled The book purposeful empathy? How is that different from regular empathy? Why is it important? How do we apply it?

Anita Nowak 08:00

Yeah, as you would know, as an empathy aficionado, as well, there's a lot of different ways people define empathy, and unpack empathy. And I guess sort of the most common two ways of looking at the phenomenon is through an effect of empathy, the feelings we have that happened to us versus cognitive empathy, which involves our neocortex and sort of perspective taking, imagining what others are experiencing. And so, I put a fine point on purposeful empathy. Because I think we need to engage empathy on purpose. I don't think it's enough that we just have the capacity to empathize. And in the moment, when somebody's telling us a poignant story, we feel a resonance with them, our mirror neurons are firing, we're feeling affective empathy. I think when it comes to the way we design our world, the way we design public policy, the way that we think about foreign aid, the way we think about how we treat each other and our families and our relationships across political divides, that we need to engage in empathy on purpose. So that's why.

Maria Ross 08:58

Yeah, gosh, amen. And I love that because there is this notion of many people. And I'm sure you've dealt with this in your talks, as I have where people say, Well, I'm just not naturally empathetic. And we know from science that we are actually born empathetic creatures in our DNA. It's how our species has survived. And barring a few psychological anomalies, we are born with it. But the muscle atrophies. And so, I think many of us expect empathy to just show up for us versus tap into it. So, I like this idea of being intentional and purposeful. What are some ways people can do that? How do you advise especially in the book or in your coaching models, you know, if they go great, I'm on board, I want to intentionally activate my empathy. Where do I start?

Anita Nowak 09:51

Well, I can do that with a story that happened to me. So, as I was learning about the neuroscience of empathy and the whole idea that we have neuroplasticity so we can really literally rewire our brains by thinking different thoughts and behaving in different ways. I did a lot of different personal experiments. And one story I like to share, which I still think is a powerful example of, you know, making the decision to be empathic in the moment. I was standing in a long lineup at a FedEx in about 10 years ago, 12 years ago, so before mobile phones were, you know, part of our appendage, and so there was nothing to distract us. And it was the lineup during the holidays, 30 minutes, I was waiting, waiting, waiting,

waiting, get up to the counter. And the woman who greeted me at the FedEx counter was rude. And I mean, like, capital are rude and unnecessarily rude that she, she triggered me in a way that I thought I was just gonna like, oh, well, you think I've been there? Yeah. But in that moment, I had a flash, I'm like, okay, let me test this empathy thing. And so I took a breath, and I looked at her and I asked her, Are you okay? And when she realized that I was not being sarcastic, and I was being earnest. She broke down straightaway into tears. And she said, I have been working double shifts for two weeks straight. I have a son at home, who's got a fever, I'm catching the flu. I haven't had a lunch break. It's 3pm. I'm just flat out exhausted. And I we read a reached out for hands across the counter, we locked eyes, we were both crying, I got her a mint tea came back. And then she served me with elegance and grace and my parcel went off to the world. But that was just a moment of getting goosebumps just talking to it's a moment that has served me so often to say, how can I flip the switch in this moment, because we are all, you know, wandering around as perfectly resilient, amazing human beings. But we have so many things going on in our lives below the surface that we just don't know, even coming across colleagues on a regular basis. And just taking the time to kind of check in with somebody and change the dynamic of a conversation with the gesture of empathy. It's available to us all. And once you get into the habit, you start looking for ways to do it. And it just becomes part of your way of being in the world. And honestly, it makes you a happier person. That's what I've discovered.

Maria Ross 09:51

A hundred percent and this just happened to be a few weeks ago, ironically, when I was flying back from delivering an empathy and leadership training session, there was a massive flight delay in Dallas to get me home. And it ended up being delayed hours and hours and hours, and then they bumped the flight to the next day. So, talk about angry people. But it was one of those moments where you could tell there was just chaos going on at the airport, all over the place anyway. And I could tell dealing with the gate agent, even though I was pissed, right? I was like, she's just getting it from all sides. So, I same thing I sort of like how could I flip this? And I spoke to her in a way of like, how are you doing? Like, I know, this is not your fault. We're all really frustrated, I actually offered to get her an iced tea, I offered to get her a drink. And I said, well, obviously not an alcoholic one. But you know, whatever. And I was still really angry about the situation I was in. But two things happened. One was I felt happier in the situation. It was like me being empathetic with her and reaching out to her made me feel better. The second thing was it enabled me to have a clear enough head that I even mediated somebody else yelling at her to say, okay, I think everyone's frustrated, we all need to just take a breath. Like, it's not your fault. It's not her fault. And it didn't make either of them, you know, shake hands and hug. But everyone at least took a beat. Right? And so, and that was actually really hard for me to just get out of my own anger and frustration and getting home to my son and whatever. But it made the exchange better.

Anita Nowak 14:05

For sure did and that you shouldn't upgrade yourself. If you feel triggered, we all feel triggered. We have emotions, right? That's part of life. But I think what I've discovered is having self-awareness that there's an opportunity to change the circumstances, and taking a minute to just breathe. And sometimes, you know, you might even need a few minutes. You can do it in a nanosecond. But you know, our brains cannot be in a state of anxiety or stress and in the state of empathy simultaneously. So if you're feeling triggered by emotions, and you want to down regulate or self-regulate, one of the

best on ramps to empathy is through a little visit of gratitude. So, if you think about something that you are grateful for, well, like, okay, the flight is delayed. What does that mean? That means I'm not going to be on a plane that's going to land with a crash. Let me be grateful for that. Let me be grateful for the fact that I don't work in a place where I can have you know, really people yelling me all the time. Right, then all of a sudden empathy can open up.

Maria Ross 15:04

Right? Right. And I think too, it's, it's also, you know, I, you probably get this question a lot too of like, well, what if I'm trying to be empathetic with someone who's not being empathetic to me. And I often say, well, it's not your job to change them. If you are the one that's realizing there's a lack of empathy in the exchange, it's actually your job to step up and model it, and see how it changes the dynamic of the exchange. And so, it's almost like, I hate to phrase it this way. But it's almost like the person who's a little bit more emotionally secure in that moment. It's kind of incumbent upon them to engage in purposeful empathy, because maybe the other person just doesn't have the capacity for it at that moment.

Anita Nowak 15:46

Yeah, I totally agree with you.

Maria Ross 15:48

Love it, love it. Okay. So, what are I mean, we've talked a lot on the show about different benefits of empathy. But let's let's get to the very individual level, and whether it applies to you as an individual in your personal life, or you as an individual in your work life and your workplace. What are the personal benefits of extending empathy, but marrying that with it not crossing over into what you call empathy fatigue? Because that is a big question people have, especially if they are overly empathic.

Anita Nowak 16:19

Right. So, the benefits are really clear. The neuroscientists who have studied what it means to be in an empathic embrace tell us through their sophisticated fMRI machines, that our pleasure and reward centers light up this same way they do if we're eating fantastic food, high on psychedelics, or even in a post coital moment, I don't know how they measure that.

Maria Ross 16:47

From the studies from Masters and Johnson, probably, yeah.

Anita Nowak 16:52

But what happens to our bodies, physiologically is that cortisol drops. So, and cortisol is a hormone, a stress related hormone that causes all sorts of inflammation in the body that's, you know, connected to a bunch of chronic diseases. And as the cortisol drops, what grows in our bodies are hormones like oxytocin, and the feel-good hormones that we experience when we're feeling really connected to someone. And with that comes a whole host of benefits where our breathing stabilizes, they say our immune system functions better. So, there's just a ton of evidence that shows that when we are in an empathic embrace with someone, we're feeling emotionally connected, it is soothing to our system, and to our psychology and to our spiritual nature. So that's beautiful. But there are limits to that, right. And

we see it most obviously, in people who are in the service professions, right? Anybody who's a front care, health care worker, Frontline, health care worker, teachers, to a certain extent psychologists, social workers, humanitarians, even social entrepreneurs, people who are extending empathy, as part of their job, have to find ways in which to also create spaces for self-empathy. So, like the rituals of coming home and taking a bath, or being in nature, there's great research coming out of Japan on I think the Japanese word for forest bathing is shooting yuku, which is just wandering through nature has a health like tonic to us. And so, there's lots of ways that we can recharge our batteries. But we really must, because when we reach a saturation point, and we can no longer you know, we don't have the capacity to empathize, we actually can become really mean,

Maria Ross 18:36

Right, while the well runs dry at some point, even even for the best-intentioned people. So, what I hear you saying is that, not only do we need to be intentional when we practice empathy, we also need to be intentional when we need to back off and, and refuel.

Anita Nowak 18:52

Hundred percent.

Maria Ross 18:53

I love it. I love it so much. So, what are some other advice you have for people about overcoming empathy fatigue? What can they do to set better boundaries, from actually taking on the feelings and the anxiety and the fear and the all the things from other people that they're trying to create an empathic connection with?

Anita Nowak 19:17

Sure. So well, one of my favorites is known as a metta meditation. So metta is a Sanskrit word for loving kindness. And it's something so beautiful to practice, which is it's a four-step process. So just imagine we're going to do some metta meditation together. So right now, we're going to both think about people we love, okay, our family, our siblings, parents, children, our beloved, and we send them loving kindness. What does that mean? We send them, you know, just we want them to have a great day. We want them to catch the green lights when they're in a rush. We want them to find that perfect pair of shoes on sale, whatever, right?

Maria Ross 19:58

Right.

Anita Nowak 19:59

Then as a second step, we think about all the people we really like. So that could be our colleagues at work that could be our neighbors, people we went to high school with, just send them the same kind of loving kindness. Then the third step, and you do this for like a minute or two, each category. So, the third group is strangers, we send loving kindness to strangers, we think about, I don't know, a fisherman in the Philippines, or a farmer in Idaho that, you know, had the wheat on his farm that's in the bread that you ate with your breakfast, and you just send loving kindness to strangers. And then the fourth category, which is of course, the toughest but worth doing is you send loving kindness to people who

may have disappointed you, or hurt you, or that you disagree with on a fundamental or political level, and you even send them loving kindness. And this flexes the empathy muscle that all of us as human beings are worthy. You know, I heard one of the things that I remember learning that struck me the most and has always stayed with me comes from a Islamic arts historian. She has a PhD in Islamic art. She's originally from Turkey, she now lives in Washington, DC. Her name is Philip [...] I hope they got that right. And she I asked her an interview I said, what is it about? Is there anything in Islamic art that actually has informed her thinking about empathy? She writes prolifically about empathy herself. And she said, Oh, yes, the circle. And I said, really the circle? And she said, what's that about? And she said, well look, it the most basic geometry is connecting two dots right into a line. And then if you connect three dots, you got to triangle four, it's either a rectangle, square, whatever, because you can also have a collection of dots that make no shape that has a name, and you can connect them all. When you spread, when you stretch, like imagine stretching out all of those little dots to its furthest end point, they all end up in a circle, they can't No, no shape can be stretched out further than a circle. So, circle encompasses everything. And she said, when you think about a circle, it's made up of an infinite number of dots along its circumference. And if you think about humanity as each of those dots, okay, so there's 7 billion of us almost 8 billion, imagine eight, the 8 million dots on this circle, all of us, all of us are equidistant to center, all of us. And no matter where we are on the circle, either side by side, or across the way, we all have a different perspective towards the center. So, I find that an amazing metaphor for empathy, because we all have different lived experiences. And yet we all share this common humanity. So, I think you know, something like a metta meditation, if you get into the habit of doing it, if even if you're in traffic, or you're washing your hair or whatever, you don't have to take like, an hour of your day to meditate. But I think it's a really good way of, of flexing your empathy muscles in a way that is also kind to yourself.

Maria Ross 22:59

Oh, my God, I love it. I mean, it reminds me so much I read a book, I can't recall the title of the book. But it was a book on leadership from the Dalai Lama, but it was actually written by somebody else, and it's escaping me, but I will find it and I will put it in the show notes. And he talked a lot about that about sending love and blessings and good intentions to the people that have hurt you the most to people that you perceive as enemies, because it actually changes your mindset, it changes your not just your mood, but also it sounds like from what you're saying physiologically. And that's, again, the hardest thing to do. And I think in our very divisive world right now. It's something really, really hard to do. And I, I have tried to do that with you know, this is a little bit personal, but even in my in my prayers, like trying to say prayers for the leaders that I find repulsive and cruel and mean of just, I hope their heart heals, I hope they find their way. Because when they find their way if if good things happen for them in terms of them healing, that's actually good for the rest of the world, because of the actions they will take as a result of that. So I try to I try to find that in my prayers for what's going on in the world right now. You know, in between the cursing and the getting mad and all of that,

Anita Nowak 24:26

Right. That's right, and it's Canadian Thanksgiving coming up this weekend. I know that yours as we're taping this and, and yours is coming up in about a month. I think thanksgiving has changed in our lives because we don't talk about politics or society because we're so afraid of the divisions that it might cause and sort of the animosity at the dinner table. And I think we can't allow different political opinions

to break down our social fabric. We as human beings, want a sense of belonging by nature. That's how we survived as a as homosapiens right, so we really need to draw on that. Well,

Maria Ross 25:05

So much good stuff. All right, I have this last question for you, because I'm so intrigued by it. Can you talk a little bit about empathogens, and the relationship between empathy and psychedelics?

Anita Nowak 25:16

Yeah. So, I read Michael Pollan's book, how to change your mind, which is about psychedelics. And I was curious to understand the connection with empathy, because it struck me that when you're when you are high on psychedelics, you know, all sorts of new ways of seeing the world and new ways of seeing relationships open up. And it turns out that pre-Nixon era, there were a lot of researchers that were studying LSD, and psilocybin and MDMA in order to understand what the what potential it had for therapy for things like alcoholism, PTSD, and there was just a ton of research showing a positive relationship between taking these drugs being accompanied by a trained professional, and outcomes as a result. But of course, all that got shut down by the Nixon administration, right enemy public enemy number one is drugs. And then there was the whole incarceration movement and sort of the what is it called the I forgotten the word but it's the prison industrial complex, right. Also at the same time, it in the meantime, we're now seeing a resurgence of research. And if you look at any of the research centers at the ivy, League's they all have them, even the best hospitals in your country are looking at them. And that's wonderful news. There's a lot of new funding going in the direction of psychedelics to help with therapeutic, you know, there's not been much movement in therapy in a long, long time, most of it is all just through pharmacology. But now there's another pathway that's opening up so in pathogens is a word that was coined by a Harvard professor actually to talk about the state that we're in when we're using certain drugs. And MDMA was actually originally called, it's now known, the street name is ecstasy. But it was originally called empathy, because of the state of feeling that we were in and it was only in Los Angeles, a man decided that he would rebrand from empathy to ecstasy, because he thought it would sell better and he was writing Wow, permeated the, the club scene, and it took off. And then of course, it was shut down by the FDA.

Maria Ross 27:38

So you're saying that the research showed that when people were on that drug, they displayed more empathy, they felt more empathy? How did they measure that?

Anita Nowak 27:46

Yeah. Personal anecdotal feedback about how did that feel to you that people just felt a sense of like, connection, resonance, and I feel you and I hear you. Yeah, that's what's Wow, there's now new research and something that I'm personally very interested in is how can I don't mean like, let's all get stoned and live a better life. I mean, leverage psychedelics, to open up neural pathways that might allow us to see the way we are all connected our interconnectedness, our connection to the planet and to me, and that there might be an opportunity for us to actually kind of see past a very materialist and and me-me-me culture.

Maria Ross 28:32

Right? Oh, my gosh. And, you know, that brings up so much. I mean, maybe this is a little controversial. But what it sparks for me when you say that is therapies for rehabilitation of violent criminals, for example, not that we would force them to take psychedelics, but the opportunities within hope, you know, hopefully, rehabilitative therapies that they're hopefully going through, would, would maybe help with that, and then also to head off more dangerous tendencies and someone that's starting to display those those traits, and then now they're in therapy, you know, a way to marry that with the with the talk therapy that they're doing or whatever of their behavioral therapy that they're engaged in.

Anita Nowak 29:15

I think the potential is that anybody who has experienced trauma, most of us have some way or other, it's a new modality of healing and opens up for us is, as you said, you know, earlier in the conversation, we were saying, you know, both of you are triggered, but maybe one of you has the capacity, the wherewithal, imagine if, you know, we could develop the capacity to heal past our pains, so that more of that empathy was accessible to us.

Maria Ross 29:45

Oh, my gosh, I love it. I love it so much. Well, this has been a very enlightening conversation. And I'm very excited for the book. I'm going to read the name of it again here purposeful empathy, tapping our hidden superpower for personal or organizational and social change. It will be out in April 2023. But available for pre sale now. Yes, correct. Awesome. And we will have all your links in the show notes. I need it as well as some of the things we talked about in books we referenced today. But for folks listening on the go or exercising while they're listening to the podcast, where's a great place, they can learn more about you and your work or connect with you.

Anita Nowak 30:23

Two simple places you just put into YouTube purposeful empathy, and you'll find me I've got YouTube series and also my website, Anita Novak, and oh, wak.com

Maria Ross 30:37

Awesome. Thank you so much for your insights today, and best of luck with the book.

Anita Nowak 30:41

Thank you Maria. Have a wonderful day.

Maria Ross 30:44

And thank you everyone for listening to another great guest on the empathy edge podcast. If you liked the episode, please don't keep it to yourself, share it with others. And don't forget to rate and review if you have an opportunity. Until next time, please always remember our mantra here. cashflow, creativity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. Take care and be kind.