

# THE REAL *Mr Nice*

You can be healthier, happier – and even change the world – simply by developing your powers of empathy, says philosopher Roman Krznaric. Louise Chunn discovers her sensitive side

Photographs **Trent McMinn**

**D**o you ever feel your life is lacking something? Maybe you've ticked the career and relationship boxes, read this year's key self-help texts, tried everything from running marathons to meditation... but *still* haven't found what you're looking for. What if you're searching in the wrong place? What if it's not looking inwards, but stepping into someone else's shoes that will stop the negative voice in your head? What if something as simple as saying 'I feel your pain' could lessen your own? I'm talking about empathy, the human ability to connect and understand others.

You're going to be hearing a lot more about empathy, especially from this man, Roman Krznaric. He's an academic-turned-popular philosopher and founding member of The School of Life, who's spent the past 10 years steeping himself in the research of empathy. The real Mr Nice, if you like. I visited his family home, a plant-filled, terraced house in Oxford, to discuss his blueprint for our future, *Empathy: A Handbook For Revolution*. Having (empathically) ascertained exactly how I like my coffee, we settled down at his kitchen table to talk about the E-word and how we can all benefit from its life-changing qualities.

'We've known for a while that empathy works in improving relationships - couples counsellors tell us that we should try to see how our partner sees the world, to put ourselves in their shoes and feel their emotions,' says Krznaric. 'But it's much bigger than that, affecting social lives, work and society.'

The trouble is, there's an empathy deficit. A US study showed students' self-reported empathy levels have declined since 1980, with an especially steep drop in the past 10 years. Think about your own life: to get a seat on the bus or train, you're pushing someone else out of the way - ditto for the H&M Isabel Marant sweatshirt. Then there's the 4x4 driver who's just cut you up, the shoutiness of the guy on the phone sitting next to you in Caffè Nero...

The 'what's in it for me?' generation might find the idea of a society based on sharing and caring impractical, or even unappealing. But, says Krznaric, a narcissistic way of living is never going to be the answer. 'There is such a lot to be gained for us all in practising empathy,' he promises. I thought about my neighbours, Tracey and Simon. Our relationship began when I brought their bins in for them, they lent me their hose, fed our cat while we were away... Once, they were nameless neighbours; now it's become a real friendship.

And, Krznaric says, it's important to understand that empathy is not just 'a nice, fluffy concept' but has evidence in evolutionary biology, neuroscience >>

Empathy is not just 'a nice fluffy concept', says Roman Krznaric - we're actually hard-wired for it

and psychology, for starters. It turns out human beings are hard-wired for it. Did you know we have ‘mirror neurons’, parts of the brain that fire up when you see someone else doing something you’ve experienced? Another study shows your brain releases oxytocin, a bonding hormone, when you see someone in distress, together with the ‘feel-good’ neurochemicals serotonin and dopamine, which encourage you to want to help. When you send money to a charity, say, you feel a hormonal lift.

**P**aradoxically, a compelling reason for growing your own empathy is that it has selfish benefits, like being good for your health. People who have high levels of ‘eudaimonic’ wellbeing (the kind that comes from finding your purpose in the world and acting on it) show more favourable gene-expression profiles in their immune cells, for example. In other words, if you are interested in the feelings of others, you will be healthier and possibly even live longer.

You might counter, as I did, that we don’t seem to follow our hard-wiring. It’s hard to see much empathy when the internet is full of trolls, the distance between the haves and have-nots is increasing and celebrity culture has tipped over into narcissism. There seem to be plenty of reasons to believe we live in a dog-eat-dog world – and it’s the biggest dogs who get what they want.

But, as Krznaric explains in his book, huge movements based on empathy have already changed society. The evacuation of children from the East End of London during the Second World War ended up being a major reason for the establishment of the welfare state. These kids, names written on luggage labels attached to hand-me-down clothes, malnourished and often with treatable illnesses, shocked the well-fed citizens of the English countryside into action.

While we’d probably all agree that City bankers and other fat cats could do with a big dose of empathy, there are lots of uses for it in our own lives, too. The school-gate division between women who work and those who stay at home, perhaps. A complaining relative. A slacking co-worker. But how to move from established positions to empathy? And won’t that make us vulnerable? If we’re ‘nice’, won’t we get used?

Discussing this with Krznaric, I was reminded of my friend Rosa and the ongoing row with her sister over support for their invalid mother. As Rosa told me, ‘Organising any sharing of duties, my sister is always incredibly high-handed and domineering.’ After an empathy training course at work, she decided to try the technique at home. ‘I thought really hard and came to realise my sister thought I had a much easier time of it than her, because I don’t have children and I earn better money. Once I could just see her position, she was much easier to talk to.’

As Rosa’s story shows, your powers of empathy can grow. It’s true that nurtured babies are primed to become more empathic adults, but even so, it’s perfectly possible to try, consciously, to develop it. A great place to start, says Krznaric, is by talking to strangers. The idea is to move away from the like-minded souls we hang out with, in real life and on social media, and try to see into other people’s lives. It’s one reason Krznaric, his economist wife and their twin five-year-olds live in a relatively socially mixed part of Oxford. Similarly, ceramicist

Lou Rota says she’s taken her two daughters to less privileged places like Mozambique and Borneo ‘because I want them to see how other people live, and that not everyone has our advantages’, adding, ‘It’s been an eye-opener for all of us.’

The films and TV you watch, the books you read – all can enrich your empathic powers. A recent study at the New School for Social Research in New York proved that reading literary fiction, such as Orange Prize-winner *The Tiger’s Wife* by Téa Obreht, enhances the ability to detect and understand other people’s emotions.

You can use empathy as a powerful force in dealing with conflict. For example, say your boss is always blaming you for things that she’s done wrong. Says Krznaric, ‘It’s not okay for her to treat you badly, but it will help you to try to understand her perspective, the pressures on her.’ And, as he points out, that knowledge can be powerful. In a peacemaking technique called Nonviolent Communication, repeating back what your opponent has told you leads to a settlement 50% faster. I know in dealing with my children that thinking about my effect on them ends up with a better outcome – less anger on my part; fewer tears on theirs.

In Krznaric’s ideal world, empathy would be everywhere. Children would have empathy training at school, workplaces would focus on it, along with profits, there’d be an empathy museum and even empathy travel agents. ‘After all, the headlong pursuit of individualism, money and status is not making people happy, and it’s just getting worse,’ he says.

Travelling back to London, as if by magic I came right by a chance to step up and use empathy. Walking up the steps from my local Tube station, I came upon a middle-aged woman with a stick, painfully climbing one step at a time. I’ll admit it – I hesitated. Then I took her arm while she climbed the rest of the way. We chatted for the two or three minutes it took and she told me she’d damaged her hamstring and was going to the doctor. I saw a glimpse of someone else’s life and felt grateful for my own health. Now that’s empathy. ■  
*Empathy: A Handbook For Revolution* by Roman Krznaric (Rider, £12.99) is out on February 6th. [Romankrznaric.com](http://Romankrznaric.com). For workshops, see [theschooloflife.com](http://theschooloflife.com)

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## JOIN THE EMPATHY REVOLUTION

- **In a difficult relationship situation, ask your partner:** What are you feeling? What do you need? And *listen* to the answers.
- **To solve a dispute:** Listen empathically – without interruption, really focusing on what is being said. It may not change your mind, but it will give you insight into how the opposing side views things, which can only be to your advantage.
- **In the digital world:** Use your own name – you’re far less likely to be cruel or rude to someone if they can see who you are.
- **To open your mind:** By sticking to what you always do, you end up judging people and places as stereotypes, rather than actual individuals. Visit a different café, take public transport or speak to someone you often see but don’t know.