



## Oreos and Empathy



*Krista Leh for xSEleratED*

In February 2020, a dear friend and I had just sat in a subway in New York City on our way to see a Broadway show. I glanced up at the row of seats across from us and noticed that a man sat alone in the middle of the seats. He was hunched over, and I saw that his right hand was casually making its way toward the dirt-trodden floor of the subway. He reached for a broken piece of Oreo cookie, remnants of a nearly empty carton tossed on the floor by a former passenger. He slowly brought the cookie piece up and inserted it into his mouth with his head still down. Then reached back down for another broken portion.



I noticed more passengers got on, and no one sat beside the man. Instead, they preferred to huddle closer to each other, remaining separated from him. My friend and I continued our conversation, but I couldn't stop the thoughts running through my brain. "He must be so hungry!" "I hate being hungry!" "How can I help?" "What can I do?" "Do I have cash for food?" "Do I have random snacks in my bag right now?"

As our stop approached, I searched my bag and found two protein bars. As the subway slowed to a stop, I held them out to the man and said, "Sir, I have these two protein bars. Would you like them?"

He looked at me and replied, "Yes, thank you."

Once we stepped off the subway at our stop, my friend looked at me and said, "I knew you weren't going to get off without doing something. I saw him, too. I felt for him. But I didn't feel compelled to act the way you did."

Dr. Emiliana Simon-Thomas's research on **Empathy** describes the type of Empathy I felt as affective empathy, which motivated me to take compassionate action, while my friend experienced cognitive empathy.

When realizing how complex the concept of empathy is and how it can be presented differently as we experience it, it might seem daunting to discuss with students. However, educators can facilitate dialogue on empathy by asking questions that help students explore their feelings, thoughts, and potential actions in situations where empathy might be needed. Consider sharing this story with your students and asking them to discuss some of these questions:

- ❖ What emotions do you think the man in the story might have been experiencing? Why?
- ❖ Have you ever witnessed a situation that made you feel compassion or concern for someone else? How did you feel?
- ❖ What is the difference between feeling someone else's feelings and understanding what they are going through?
- ❖ How do you think the other passengers on the subway might have felt about the man? Why might they have acted as they did?
- ❖ What do you think motivated the writer to act in this situation?
- ❖ How is affective empathy (feeling someone's emotions) different from cognitive empathy (understanding someone's emotions)?
- ❖ Have you ever experienced a situation where you wanted to help but didn't know how to act? What held you back?
- ❖ What actions could someone take to show empathy in a similar situation?
- ❖ What small ways can you practice empathy in your daily life, at school, or in your community?
- ❖ How do you think the man might have felt when he received the protein bars? How might small acts of kindness impact someone?

- ❖ What might be some challenges to showing empathy in public or unfamiliar settings? How can we overcome them?
- ❖ How can we become more aware of the needs of others around us, even when we are busy or distracted?
- ❖ How would this story change if told from the man's perspective on the subway?
- ❖ Why do you think some people might feel empathy but not act on it? Is one type of empathy more valuable than the other?
- ❖ How can understanding the difference between affective and cognitive empathy help us build better relationships?

These questions help students connect personally to the concept of empathy, understand its complexity, and consider how they can translate empathy into action in their own lives.

***In addition, check out this [Demonstrating Compassion](#) resource to further the conversation with students on this valuable skill!***

