

The Washington Post

College students losing their sensitive side

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Are college students as nice as they used to be? Apparently not, and modern technology may be partly to blame.

A new University of Michigan study has found that since 2000, college students have become less empathetic.

Compared with college kids of the late 1970s, the study says, today's are less likely to agree with statements including "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective" and "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me."

The meta-analysis was led by Sara Konrath, a researcher at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, and was presented in Boston at the annual meeting of the Association for Psychological Science. She analyzed data on empathy among almost 14,000 college students over the past 30 years.

"We found the biggest drop in empathy after the year 2000," said Konrath, who is also affiliated with the University of Rochester's Department of Psychiatry. "College kids today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago, as measured by standard tests of this personality trait."

Why is their empathy declining?

Konrath and graduate student Edward O'Brien, who worked on the study, suggest several reasons, which they hope to explore in future research.

"The increase in exposure to media during this time period could be one factor," Konrath said. "Compared to 30 years ago, the average American now is exposed to three times as much non-work-related information.

"In terms of media content, this generation of college students grew up with video games, and a growing body of research, including work done by my colleagues at Michigan, is establishing that exposure to violent media numbs people to the pain of others."

Social media may also play a role, O'Brien said.

"The ease of having 'friends' online might make people more likely to just tune out when they don't feel like responding to others' problems, a behavior that could carry over offline," he said.

Add in the hyper-competitive atmosphere and inflated expectations of success, fueled by celebrity "reality shows," and there's a social environment that works against slowing down and listening to someone who needs a bit of sympathy, he said.

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"College students today may be so busy worrying about themselves and their own issues that they don't have time to spend empathizing with others, or at least perceive such time to be limited," O'Brien said.

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