

## Personal to Political: Empathy and Peace Building

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Empathy – the capacity to put yourself in the shoes of another person and understand their feelings and perspectives – has been a central concept in psychology for more than a century. But in recent years it has gained recognition on the political level, especially as a powerful tool in peace-building processes. What does empathy look like in the realm of conflict resolution?

One of the most innovative empathy-based organisations is the [Parents Circle-Families Forum](#), which brings together Israelis and Palestinians whose family members have been killed in the conflict. Its core activity is holding meetings where individuals from both sides share their personal stories of pain and loss. The organisation, which comprises over six hundred families, has been fiercely criticised by Israeli politicians, religious groups and the mainstream media for its attempts to create grass-roots dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.

This has not stopped the group from embarking on a range of pioneering reconciliation projects. One of their early success stories was the [Hello Peace](#) telephone line. Members of the public could dial a free phone number: if you were Israeli you were put through to a Palestinian to talk with them for up to half an hour, and if you were Palestinian you spoke to an Israeli. Between 2002 and 2009 there were over a million conversations between the two sides. While some calls began as screaming matches, others led to lasting friendships. One Israeli family ended up regularly meeting their Palestinian counterparts at a border crossing to hand over insulin for a diabetic son who was unable to get enough of the drug from Palestinian hospitals.

For a later project, named [Blood Relations](#), bereaved Israelis travelled to a hospital in Ramallah and donated blood for Palestinian victims, while bereaved Palestinian families went to Jerusalem and donated blood to the Israeli Red Cross. The aim of the project was captured in a single question: ‘Could you hurt someone who has your blood running through their veins?’

The Parents Circle also operates an education programme, in which an Israeli and a Palestinian team up and give talks to Israeli teenagers about to enter military service, simply telling them the story of their personal loss. This [dialogue project](#) reaches over 25,000 students annually.

At the centre of all their work is a belief in the power of conversation, reflected in the group's motto, 'It won't stop until we talk'. As one Parents Circle activist stresses, empathic dialogue is the key to ending the conflict: 'We must be prepared to listen to "the other". Because if we will not listen to the other's story we won't be able to understand the source of their pain and we should not expect the other to understand our own.'

What this and other conflict resolution initiatives share is a recognition that new laws and peace agreements negotiated at the level of elite politics are not enough: long-term peace requires rebuilding personal relationships from the ground up – and empathy is the tool to do it.