

Empathy: Mindful Compassionate Dialogue Competency 2

There are so many benefits of cultivating empathy in your relationships. When you can give and receive empathy, each person has a deep sense of being heard. Knowing you can be heard, defensiveness relaxes and connection becomes possible. Empathy contributes to healthy differentiation, as well as emotional security. With empathy, you can truly be a companion and support for another without taking on their struggles as your own.

Empathy is a heart-based response to a heart-based expression of another. Empathy means giving your compassionate curiosity to another's experience without having an agenda. It often involves verbally guessing another's feelings and needs. For example, when someone shares about a difficulty at work, instead of trying to problem-solve you can make an empathy guess like, "Are you feeling discouraged because you need support?" In this way, empathy makes space for being present with feelings and needs so that the door to wisdom and compassion opens naturally.

1. Empathy is most essentially a deep acknowledgment and acceptance of our shared humanity and a form of attunement.
2. Empathy is the act of directing your attention to another with compassionate curiosity.
3. Verbal empathy means guessing or reflecting specific aspects of another's experience, especially feelings and needs. For example, it might sound like this, "Do you feel discouraged because you need support?" A formal empathy guess follows this structure: "**Do you feel ___ because you need (value) ___?**"
4. Empathy is a heart-based response to a heart-based expression of needs met or unmet.
5. Empathy could be offered and received through a variety of experiences. Verbal empathy requires feelings and needs vocabulary.
6. Empathy is *not* about agreement or disagreement.
7. Empathy is a form of responsiveness that depends on an internal sense of spaciousness, equanimity, and healthy differentiation..
8. Empathy requires you to maintain awareness of your own experience and stay centered and self-connected. You know when you don't have more energy for offering empathy. You can offer empathy without taking responsibility for the other person's feelings and needs.
9. Empathy often requires the ability to be comfortable with uncomfortable emotions and witness the suffering of others without trying to get them out of it. This means letting go of any agenda for the other person. (Requests about the behavior of others occur in your direct and honest expression, not in empathy).
10. Offering empathy often means being okay not understanding content when it serves the connection. You are able to let go of your own need for mental clarity regarding the facts and details of what someone is sharing if it doesn't serve the connection.
11. Empathy is grounded in the knowledge that when someone is heard deeply, they have greater access to wisdom and compassion.
12. Empathy is not always the best response for every encounter. Empathy is useful when the other person has a need for empathy.

Not Empathy

These are responses that you might offer in response to someone's expression of emotion or difficulty. Usually when someone is expressing difficulty, empathy is the need they want met first. The following responses may meet needs, they are simply not empathy. Ideally, you can become conscious of these habitual responses and ask the speaker what they want back from you when they share something.

SYMPATHY: Bring attention back to yourself. *"Oh, I am so sorry, I feel terrible for you."* This may meet a need for caring.

ADVICE: You assume the other person wants to know what you think they should do. *"Well, what you could do is..."* This may meet a need for support after empathy is received.

EXPLAIN/ANALYZE: You believe that if you tell someone why they feel the way they do, they will feel better. *"You just feel bad because ..."* This may meet a need for clarity after the need for empathy is met.

CORRECT: You try to point out someone's mistake in interpreting. *"He didn't do that to hurt you, he was just in a hurry."* This may meet a need for groundedness after the need for empathy is met.

CONSOLE: *"It will be okay. You're okay, everything will work out."* This may meet a need for emotional regulation.

TELL A STORY: *"The same thing happened to me. This one time ..."* This may meet a need for acceptance or belonging.

PUSH AWAY FEELINGS: You might be uncomfortable so you tell others not to feel what they feel. *"Come on smile, don't be sad."; "Just calm down and take a deep breath."; "It's not that big of a deal, just let it go."* This typically doesn't meet any needs.

INVESTIGATE/INTERROGATE: *"Why did you do that? What made you feel that way?"* This may meet a need for clarity after the need for empathy is met, but typically is about the listener's need for clarity and information and arises out of anxiety.

EVALUATE: You decide if another's emotional response is appropriate or not. *"You are overreacting. This is no big deal."* This typically doesn't meet any needs. All emotional responses are inherently valid because they exist and are simply a part of the flow of experience.

EDUCATE: *"What I see about the situation is ... The reason you feel like that is..."* This may meet a need for learning and support after the need for empathy is met.

ONE-UP: *"That's awful, but something even worse happened to me and I was devastated."* This typically doesn't meet any needs.

DIAGNOSE: *"Sounds like you had a panic attack. I know some good herbs for anxiety."* This may meet a need for learning and support if it is consent based and offered after the need for empathy is met.

DEMAND: *"If you don't get control of your emotions, I'm leaving!"* This typically doesn't meet any needs.

DENIAL OF CHOICE: *"It's a hard thing, but we all have to do it."* This typically doesn't meet any needs.

NOD & SMILE: You feel uncomfortable and just want to get out of the situation. Or you lose track of yourself and become completely lost in the experience of the other person. This typically doesn't meet any needs.

COLLUSION: You agree and add to judgments and blame. *"You're right he really is a jerk!"* This is a tragic strategy that may meet a need for support or being seen/heard in the moment, but then escalates or entrenches reactivity.

SILVER LINING: Move past what's happening toward some possible positive outcome. *"You will learn so much from this experience!"; "You probably lost this job so you can get one that's really right for you."* This may meet a need for hope or encouragement, after the need for empathy is met.

CHEERLEADING: You assume the need is for hope or reassurance. *"You're a strong person, you can get through this."; "You've been through worse and made it."; "I believe in you."* This may meet a need for hope or encouragement, after the need for empathy is met.