

2.19 Empathy

Relating to how others feel.

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During arguments or heated discussions, many of us succumb to the temptation to seek out a practical solution as opposed to listening to what the other person is feeling. More often than not, this approach will fuel conflict as people feel unseen and unheard. Recognizing their emotions is an essential part of connecting and perhaps moving toward a resolution.

We all respond better to others when we feel understood and feel that our emotions are valid and relevant. Empathy allows everyone to feel at ease and improves almost every conversation.

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- Connects us with others, enabling everyone to feel supported and understood.
- Can be applied even when you don't agree with the other person's point of view.
- Opens a path toward deeper conversation. Often, someone who receives empathy will be more likely to listen.

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- We may not notice the emotions of others because we are too wrapped up in our own.
- Deliberately acknowledging the feelings of others ("I understand that you feel sad right now . . .") might feel artificial at times.

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One way to show empathy is through asking questions, sometimes known as empathetic guesses. These should be inquiries aimed at discovering another person's feelings. Listen carefully and try to come up with a guess or two about what your conversational partner is feeling and why. To show them that you understand what they're feeling, you may wish to describe how their emotions appear to you. Then, gently ask whether you understood them correctly. Don't ever insist that you know what someone else is feeling—you might be wrong and end up annoying them or, worse, making them feel so misunderstood that they shut down. Instead, remain open to what they share with you.

Questions can often be more effective than direct statements because they are open-ended and don't assume that you are right—they leave more room for the other party to correct you if needed. However, try to avoid sounding like you are interrogating them. The key is to go beyond understanding purely with your brain and also to connect with your heart. Feel and express sincere curiosity—don't just pump people for information.

Questions you can ask to make an empathetic connection with someone include:

- "You seem somewhat upset—is everything okay?"
- "Are you sad about X, or is it something else?"

If you're struggling to connect with another person, you can also share your emotional reality in a

bid for their empathy:

- “I really would like to be empathetic with you right now, but it’s hard because I’m frustrated myself.”
- “I’d like to be fully present, but I’m currently exhausted. Can we continue this after I take a short break?”

Another essential facet of empathy is self-empathy. You are the only person in the world who can always be there for yourself, and asking for and giving self-empathy can be just as powerful as receiving it from another person. This takes practice, but it can be highly rewarding (see Tool 3.4: Talk to your Inner Selves). Empathy is also a major component of Tool 2.1: Nonviolent Communication.

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1. Brené Brown on Empathy: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>
2. “The Secret to a Happy Relationship Is Empathy”:
<https://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mindful-anger/202003/the-secret-happy-relationship-is-empathy>