

## PRACTICING BUILDING EMPATHY

**Listen.** Listening is one of the most effective ways you can demonstrate empathy to other people. When you are practicing active listening, you are listening with purpose.<sup>[1]</sup> You aren't fiddling about on your phone, or thinking about what you're going to make for dinner tonight, you're really taking in what the other person is saying.

- If you're listening to someone and you get distracted by thinking about dinner or whatever it is you want to say next in the conversation, bring yourself back to the present by saying "I was just thinking about \_\_\_ (last thing you remember them saying)\_\_\_ and I was wondering if you could repeat what you just said so that I don't miss anything."
- Look the speaker in the eye (don't stare, but try to maintain eye contact), and sit facing the person. Don't let your gaze drift all over the place, because it will look as though you aren't paying attention and that you don't care what this person has to say.
- Active listening requires three things. First, paraphrase what the person said to show that you understood the content. This is a general listening skill as well. Second, reflect back your emotional reaction. Reflecting back your emotions is a key part of empathy because it helps the person better understand and regulate their own emotions. This is a core reason why we require empathy from others. Their reactions help us regulate our own responses and make sense of it in the world. Third, indicate how your response makes you want to behave. Expressing your behavior is another key element, because again you are demonstrating that you understand their emotional state and helping them figure out a behavior to move forward with.

**Open up.** Just listening to someone isn't going to build a bridge between the two of you. Opening up emotionally is an incredibly difficult and brave thing to do but it will deepen the connection with another person.

- Empathy is a two-way street. It's about sharing vulnerabilities and an emotional connection. To truly practice empathy you have to share your own inner landscape with someone else as they reciprocate
- This doesn't mean you have to spill your life story to every person that you meet. You get to decide who you're going to share yourself with, but, to practice empathy, you have to be open to the possibility and the opportunity of opening up, especially with the people you least expect.
- Once you find an individual with whom you'd like to be more open, try the following: rather than leaning on thoughts or opinions in conversation, attempt to express your feelings about a given topic. Try to start your sentences with "I", or in the first person. For example, "I am very glad we got to hang out today." Finally, refrain from answering a question with "I don't know" especially if it is a personal question. People often respond in this way to prevent from going deeper with another person. Try to come up with an answer that truly expresses how you feel.

**Offer physical affection.** Now, you can't do this for everyone and, obviously, you should ask before you give someone physical affection to make sure that it's okay (even if you've known them for awhile). Showing physical affection, however, can boost oxytocin levels and make both of you feel better.

- If you know the person, give them a hug, or put an arm around their shoulders, or a hand on their arm. Not only does this show that your attention is focused on them, but it creates a connection between the two of you.

**Focus your attention outwards.** Pay attention to your surroundings and to the feelings, expressions, and actions of the people around you. Be mindful about how others you interact with might be feeling.

- Notice your surroundings, really notice them. Pay attention to sounds, smells, sights and register them consciously. People tend to register things unconsciously. For example, think how many times you've walked or driven somewhere and have no memory whatsoever of getting from A to B. Take in your surroundings mindfully.
- Research has shown that practicing mindfulness about your surroundings and the people around you makes you more likely to extend empathy towards them and to help when someone needs it

**Withhold judgment.** This is an important step when practicing empathy and when practicing mindfulness. It can be really hard to withhold immediate judgment, especially when first meeting or interacting with someone. And yet, this is a crucial step towards being empathetic. Try to gain a deeper understanding of someone else's perspective without immediately saying that it is bad or good. In this way you're able to get to a deeper level of understanding. This does not necessarily mean that the other person is right or good, but taking the time to gain a deeper perspective will help you in developing empathy towards them.

- Of course, this is not to say that if someone is acting a reprehensible manner (saying racist or sexist things or behaving like a bully) that you shouldn't intervene or say something. Speaking up is an act of courage and compassion.
- Making snap judgments about others is a fundamental aspect of being human. We developed this ability from our ancestors in order to read potentially dangerous people and situations. However, this innate mechanism can be hard to override.
- Try to override this judgment by: 1) Looking deeper at the person for ways you can empathize with a situation the person is going through. 2) Noting a few things this person probably has in common with you (when we can uncover universal commonalities we are less likely to judge others). 3) Asking the person questions, so you can learn more about their unique story.

**Offer help.** This shows that you see what someone is going through and you want to make life easier for them. Offering help is a great act of empathy, because it shows that you're willing to take time out of your day to do something for someone else without asking anything in return.

- Offering help can be as simple as holding the door for a person who's entering the same building as you, or buying a coffee for the person behind you in line. It can be as big as helping your grandfather set up his computer and talking him through how it works. Or, it can be offering to take care of your sister's kids for the weekend so she can take a break.
- Even just offering the opportunity to help, can be an empathetic gesture. Tell a friend that if they need anything they can ask, opening up the way for providing help and support.