

Empathy building exercise – learning to be empathetic – increasing emotional understanding

William Bishop, LPC, LMFT, AAMFT Approved Supervisor

Quick summary: In difficult times often we really want someone to ‘just be there for us’ and to ‘show compassion and understanding for what we are dealing with’ as opposed to offering pragmatic solutions or taking initiative to ‘fix it.’ In short people very often simply want empathy and they can feel worse, alone, or misunderstood if their confidant goes into problem solving mode. In this post I will give you a methodology as to how to offer empathy to a person. The process might not feel genuine at first, but by understanding and utilizing this technique you will eventually grow a more sincere empathetic ability.

Can you teach someone to be more empathetic? YES . . .

I use this exercise in couples therapy all the time and I must admit that even I am extremely surprised with the results (the growth in empathetic ability for many of my clients has far exceeded my expectations).

This is not always easy for the client, when a client willingly breaks down their own emotional barriers they are often overwhelmed with a flood of emotions that they had left unattended for years. The courage and strength that I have witnessed in my clients as I witness them allowing themselves to open themselves up to their own and to their partner’s emotions has left me feeling humbled. . . incredible courage.

How can a contrived exercise teach a person to truly be able to understand and feel the emotions of another person?

- Perhaps every one already is empathetic. . . some people just do not know how to hold a conscious awareness of the emotional content that they receive from another.
- As a social animal it appears that we are ‘wired’ to be empathetic. . . we all have an innate ability to be empathetic. Neurological research is substantiating this. . . (Research surrounding mirror neurons and the intrapersonal dynamics of the brain are helping us to better understand the science behind our interconnectedness.)
- I am suggesting that everyone has the ability to be empathetic, some people simply lack the techniques that facilitate an empathetic encounter and they lack an ability to recognize when to use their empathetic skills and when to use their ‘fix it’ skills.

I would hypothesize that **we are conditioned or taught to use our problem solving abilities with greater frequency or instead of our empathetic abilities.**

- It appears that society rewards ‘problem solvers’ and people that offer tangible ‘fixes’ with greater effort than it rewards those you offer emotional nurturance. This system of rewards conditions people (especially males in many cultures) to engage in fixing behaviors as opposed to empathy behaviors.

To answer the question succinctly, this exercise teaches you how to facilitate an empathetic encounter and with practice you will learn to discern when to use empathy and when to use more pragmatic problem solving skills. (This of course is a false dichotomy as empathy guides an effective solution and offering empathy very often is the solution.)

What is empathy? what am I trying to experience and why?

- Empathy is the ability for you to figuratively put yourself in the shoes of your partner so that you can feel what emotions he/she is holding.
- You will feel these emotions while having a full understanding that these are your partner’s emotions and not your own.
- You will allow yourself to be fully accepting of your partner’s emotions and perceptions... you validate him/her with your selfless attunement.
- as you offer this empathy your partner will feel as though his/her emotions are being cradled and nurtured in your emotional arms... they will feel understood, accepted, connected, important, and loved... within these

feelings all suffering can be nurtured towards resolution.

- Existentially we fear being alone... and biologically we suffer when we feel disconnected. Empathy fosters the attachment which offers both existential and biological nurturance.

Empathy building exercise

(I will be using the term 'partner' for simplicity though this exercise can be done with a friend, a family member, a colleague etc.)

Guidelines

-

There is one talker and one listener

The listener has the responsibility to understand the emotional and logistical content that their partner is sharing.

You should be able to understand and to relay back to your partner:

- What was his/her perception of the occurrence?
- What was troubling about this occurrence?
- What were the emotions that he/she felt at the time of the occurrence?
- What emotions are being expressed in this moment?
- What does he/she need from you (which is often just to be empathetic)?

Start by taking time by yourself to practice using these skills on yourself... **your ability to understand your own emotions will directly affect your ability to empathize with your partner.**

- Think of a difficult time that you experienced and answer all the above question related to your own perception and the resulting emotional experience.

Tip 1.) Allow yourself to be curious and open-minded

- Allow yourself to listen as if your only job is to understand.
- Allow yourself to listen without using your preconceptions... allow yourself to know that you know nothing... everything you need to learn you will be learning right now.
- Free yourself from trying to create consistency between your feeling/perceptions and your partner's feelings and perceptions... for now just focus on understanding the unique experience of your partner.

Tip 2.) Act like a therapist – allow yourself to listen as if you are not personally responsible for the content.

- Listen as though the narrative is not about you if you need help controlling your defensiveness or your guardedness.
- Notice your bias and choose to not let it control your actions (see rules below).

Tip 3.) Be vulnerable and accepting of your body's natural response.

- If your empathy encourages you to experience strong authentic emotions of your own (as opposed to emotions related to suppression, avoidance, denial or defensiveness) let them flow as long as they are not disruptive (anger) and hold an awareness of which emotions are yours and which emotions are your partners.
- Feeling the sadness of your partner may make you cry...
- **Know that your time for expression will come... your ability to meet the emotional needs of your partner will best prepare them to do the same for you.**

The talker has the responsibility of allowing himself or herself to be vulnerable enough to transmit the emotional content.

- To do so generally necessitates that he/she allows an honest emotional expression.
- **The talker will allow himself or herself to feel the emotional impact of the narrative** as opposed to talking about the subject in a guarded 'matter of fact' type of way.
- If the talker is disconnected from his/her emotions then it will be very difficult for the partner to be empathetic – it is hard to understand or identify an emotion that is being guarded, avoided, distracted from, repressed etc.
- **Be clear about the way that the narrative affected you emotionally.**

- Say things like, “**this experience left me feeling really _____ at the time... right now I am feeling really _____ about the whole thing.**”
- It is easiest for your partner to hear you when you take responsibility for your own emotional reactions.
Actions or situations don’t make every person feel the same way... explain why the action encouraged your unique emotional response.
- **Explain why the event was significant to your past.** We all have early life experiences that influence our emotional reactions in the present... help your partner to understand why the example causes an increased emotional response from you.
- **If you are the talker tell your partner what your need...** if you just want them to listen tell them, “**I just need you to listen to me... I really am not asking for any solutions of for you to try and fix it... please trust that listing will make me feel better.**”

Rules or codes of conduct – things that you should not do... behaviors to avoid

(these rules are helpful in general, but hey are specific to this empathy exercise – I am not saying to never defend yourself.)

Some rules are more important for the listener and some rules are more important for the talker.

1.) Avoid Being 'Right'– avoid using your logic and reason to attempt to 'disprove' the validity of your partner's emotional reaction or narrative.

- Doing so can lead your partner to feel belittled, patronized, powerless, insecure, misunderstood, oppressed, and attacked.
- **It does not matter that you believe that your partner 'misperceived' the event... your partners emotional reactions are related to his/her perceptions** (and not a 'fixed' or 'true' reality) empathizing and understanding their perception will nurture your partner towards recovery.
- Be interested and empathetic to your partners experience as opposed to being fixated on making their perception consistent with your perception (this is futile anyway as all our perceptions are subjective... yours is too.)
- **Example** – your partner tells you that she is very hurt that you were not able to attend her graduation and you respond, “I told you months ago that I would not be there... you can't be upset at me because you knew I had that business trip.”
- **Being right is very often wrong and ironically 'irrational'** – in this example the feeling exists and requires empathy to be resolved. The response will make your partner feel worse... it is therefore irrational to be 'rational' as doing such in such an instance perpetuates the problem you are seeking to resolve.

2.) Avoid being defensive – avoid correcting the plot line. Avoid using justifications. Avoid correcting what you view to be a ‘misperception’. Avoid explaining why you did what you did.

- Doing so can make your partner feel frustrated, unheard, confused (by your somewhat irrelevant retort), and unimportant.
- The way that your partner perceived the event is all that matters. **Allow yourself to notice your mind’s desire to correct the plot and then allow yourself to accept your partner’s subjective perception.**
- **Example** – your partner tells you that she was upset that you forgot to pick her up last Friday and you respond that it was last Thursday and you didn’t forget you were just really busy.
- Can you imagine any situation in which the above response would make things better?

3.) Avoid counter critiquing – avoid responding to your partner’s constructive criticism with your own criticisms about him/her.

- Doing so can leave your partner feeling annoyed, not listened to, invalidated, unimportant, frustrated, escalated, and desperate.

- Often the narrative that you will need to listen to will be about you in some way... allow your partner the space for expression... this is his/her time.
- **Example** – your partner tells you that he really feels unacknowledged when you don't thank him for cooking dinner and you respond, 'yeah well I do a lot of things around the house too that I don't get any credit for.'
- It is not that your response is invalid, rather your response takes the focus away from your partner's feelings... **your distraction or tangent will disrupt your (and his/her) ability to attend to his/her emotional content.**

4.) Avoid generalizations – making overgeneralizations will lead to your partner feeling hopeless and therefore more likely to 'tune out'. Being very specific allows your partner to better understand you.

- Doing so can make your partner feel, hopeless, attacked, defeated, as if you don't want a solution, as if you are being too excessive to relate to, and irritated.
- **Example** – you want to tell your partner that you miss going dancing like you used to and you say, " we never do anything fun anymore."
- **Overgeneralizations tend to not have solutions and they catastrophize which is isolating.**

5.) Avoid being contemptuous or trying to prove that your partner is inherently flawed. Avoid trying to attach permanent negative labels on your partner. Avoid pathologizing your partner.

- In short being mean doesn't help anyone and usually creates more guilt to manage later.
- Doing so can make your partner feel abused, defeated, hopeless, wounded, in danger, scared, angry and like giving up.
- **Example** – “yesterday when you told me that you locked the keys in the car before my meeting I realized that you are just stupid.”
- How do you fix stupid and what is the emotion that this person would like empathy for?

-
6.) Avoid avoiding, tuning out, or putting up a figurative wall

- Doing so can make your partner feel, alone, isolated, unimportant, frustrated, desperate, and out of control.
- **Stay emotionally available...** track the narrative and the emotions being displayed. to not literally or figuratively leave.
- **If you are overwhelmed please ask for a break and take some time to cool down** (as it doesn't help if you get overly emotionally escalated to the point of losing control). **When you take a break tell your partner what you are doing and when you will be able to return.**
- **Example** – your partner says, “Honey I am really worried about our son... I feel like a bad father.” and you respond, “yeah, could you pass me the TV remote.”

7.) Avoid Creating the Guessing game. Be clear with your needs and emotions... do not set your partner up to fail by requiring them to guess what you are feeling or to guess what you need.

- Doing so can make your partner feel, inadequate, like a failure, incompetent, helpless, confused, guilty, and at a loss.
- Always avoid saying one thing when you mean another... do not say it is ok if it is not ok.
- **It is a huge misconception that “if your partner loves you they will intuitively know what you need and take action to meet your needs.” the truth is that we are often very poor at identifying and meeting our own needs...**
- This expectation will leave you frustrated without your needs being met.
- If you want something... ask for it.
- **If you want your partner to listen and to not fix it... tell them that.**

you have the tools now go practice... remember to practice by yourself 1st... the first step in being empathetic to another is to learn how to empathize with your self (neurologically it is a very similar process).

Sound too difficult? This is what couples counselors are for... sometimes people need a little help... perhaps a little gentle mediation.