

EMPATHY

What is Empathy?

Empathy refers to the consistent demonstration of the ability to get out of your own way and walk in the shoes of another with the sincere desire to attempt to understand from another's perspective.

Why is it important to be empathetic?

If our aim is to understand and connect with others more, enriching all the relationships we have and will have in the future, then being empathetic is extremely important.

As those around us experience various feelings, they may begin to share those feelings with us; e.g. joy, anger, fun, frustration etc. If we choose to listen carefully and think of how that emotion is making the person speaking feel, we can have a better understanding of where the speaker is positioned emotionally and of how they wish to move forward. This can help open the speaker up to exploring a wider range of options to create more beneficial, desired outcomes.

Looking out and listening for the emotional cues, then adjusting our behaviour accordingly, also builds up a confidence and trust in relationships.

Why is it so easy to slip up in the area of empathy?

Empathy is about listening and understanding rather than trying to finding solutions for others.

One reason we slip up could simply be that we confuse sympathy with empathy. Sympathy is having a positive concern for another who is going through some painful and difficult times. Empathy is when we join the experience of another on an emotional level. The reason we can confuse empathy with sympathy is that we sometimes use empathy to help express sympathy.

Another reason we can slip up in the area of empathy could be that at times we inaccurately think we know what someone is feeling by assuming they feel the same as we would feel in the same situation. Everyone is individual, however, so everyone must be observed and listened to as individuals so that we don't fall into this trap of making assumptions about how they feel based on ourselves.

Also in today's world of limited time and quick fixes it is easy to miss out on a word spoken, facial movement, or voice tone. We are so busy trying to get the best out of our time that details can pass us by. If we try to do too many things at once, something has to give.

We think faster than we hear. Hearing is not the same as listening; listening is understanding what we hear. So we need to let go of our own thought processes and put our attention fully on the other person, in order to truly listen, and thus create the space for empathy to occur.

Specifically, to create empathy, we put our awareness on what others are feeling by observing their body language, practising good active listening and reflecting back to the person what we understand of what they have conveyed. That way we begin to see reality from the other persons' perspective.

In NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) terms, being empathetic is about getting into 2nd position – that is, the position of the person speaking. 1st position is our own perspective, thoughts and feelings. 2nd position is the other person's perspective, thoughts and feelings. Empathy requires us to be in 2nd position. This can be challenging, especially if the topic is one about which we have strong opinions or emotions.

Empathy will only be real if we have a sincere interest in caring for the other person's point of view. If we are not authentic in caring, then real empathy will not be obtained and as the fact that we don't truly care will be sensed by the other party. So words alone are not enough; we need to practise active listening and join on an emotional level to achieve real empathy.

Summary tips of how to achieve empathy

- Focus your attention fully on the other person and let go of your own thought processes – 'step into their shoes'
- Let go of assumptions and instead ask questions to find out what the other person is experiencing.
- Observe the other person's body language – their facial expressions, their posture, their tone of voice, the speed at which they are speaking, their volume etc to help you gauge their emotional state more accurately.
- Particularly listen out for emotional and / or feeling language - and check back with them to find out if you are hearing correctly how they are feeling or experiencing their situation.
- Matching the other person's body language will increase their sense of you being connected with them. If they are in a distressed state that is not useful to them, then you may find it helpful to initially match their body language, and then slowly calm your own body language and voice. If you have successfully connected with them then other person is likely to follow your lead and so also calm down thus creating a more resourceful state.

Evaluate your own Empathy

- What type of responses do you get from others when they are unburdening themselves on you? Be honest with yourself and think of the last five comments given to you.
 - 'Thanks for that, you really understand where I'm coming from'
 - 'No you don't understand what I'm going through'
 - 'I feel so much better for just having talked to you'
 - 'How can you know how I'm feeling?'

- Call the last five people you had cause to empathise with in business. Tell them you are doing some professional development exercises and would like to know how they found your empathy. Ask concrete questions, such as
 - 'The last time I worked for you, how well did I listen to how you were feeling?'
 - 'How well did you feel I understood your situation and how you felt?'
 - If they say you were not as empathetic as they would have liked, ask the questions: 'What would have made the experience of more service to you?'
 - Follow up with: 'What would I have to do, if we were to repeat the exercise, to exceed your expectations?'
- Keep a record for a two week period. For each of the three Focus Areas below, give yourself a score of 1 to 3
 - 1 = did not notice very much regarding how the other person felt
 - 2 = noticed some of the other person's feelings coming through but may have missed some too
 - 3 = spotted the other person's feelings and my ability to understand was commented on by the speaker.

Focus Areas

- Body Language – facial movements, hand gestures, eye contact, tone of voice etc.
 - Active Listening – focus and full attention is on the speaker, non judgemental and suspend your own frame of reference.
 - Reflecting Back Understanding – Verbally Paraphrase (summarise) what you understand has been said by the speaker and check for agreement. If agreement is not reached on the first Paraphrase then repeat the process until agreement is met.
- Think of someone you know who has exceptional standards of empathy. How would you rate yourself in comparison to this person (if they were a 10, what would you be)?
 - What's one thing you could do to improve how you'd rate yourself?
 - Think of someone you know who has acceptable standards of empathy. How would you rate yourself in comparison to this person (if they were a 5, what would you be)?
 - Think of the least empathetic person you have come across. How would you rate yourself in comparison to this person (if they were a 1, what would you be)?

Improve your empathy

After you have completed your evaluation, if you have noticed some room for improvement, you might like to try some of the following strategies:

- Notice how it makes you feel when others are very empathetic. Notice the specific behaviours they do that create you to experience them as empathetic. Allow this insight to provide behavioural guidance, added motivation and inspiration for you to commit to becoming exceptional in your own empathy.

- Write your own Personal Empathy Goal (PEG), and place it somewhere prominent to remind you of your personal commitment to becoming more empathetic. Make sure you set a range of standards, such as, acceptable standards for:
 - Picking up on Body Language
 - Active Listening
 - Verbal Reflection to check for Understanding
- Keep a log or notes in your diary that track your success in keeping with your PEG.
- When life becomes busy remember to stop and focus on the speaker and what the speaker is saying. Be there in the moment so allowing authentic empathy the time and space it requires.
- Be aware of your own non verbal behaviour, nodding your head, sitting straight, good eye contact. Be careful not to doodle or fidget as these may distract you from the speaker and possibly be portrayed by the speaker as you not being interested.
- When the speaker is speaking stay aware of not interrupting their flow.
- Keep asking for agreement of your understanding of the speaker's thoughts, feelings and circumstances. Ask the speaker for their feedback.

Further resources

If you would like to develop further in the area of empathy, the following books, courses and consultants may be worth considering. Please note that High Ideals does not endorse or receive any direct benefit from recommending the following resources, the list is simply a suggestive collection of materials that members of the High Ideals management team have found useful in their own development.

- The Definitive Book of Body Language by Alan & Barbara Pease
- Emotional Intelligence (CD or book) by Daniel Goleman
- Reading People by Jo-Ellan Dimitrius and Mark Mazzarella
- YouTube – Consider searching for videos using any of the following key words in a search: Active listening / Empathy / Body Language
- NLP – Perceptual Positions – see <http://www.nlpls.com/articles/perceptualPositions.php> or type NLP perceptual positions into a search engines such as <http://www.ask.com>
- <http://www.high-ideals.com> – Check out the Member Directory section for High Ideals members who offer services which could support you, such as coaching, mentoring or consulting on High Ideals criteria/values.

Author and editor acknowledgement

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This document is part of the **High Ideals** Criteria Information Series, edited by Claire Stretch. For more information on Claire please visit her profile on the High Ideals directory by clicking [here](#) and search by name.

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