

Empathy Worksheet

Empathy is the **foundation of emotional survival**. As infants, we cannot speak to our needs. Our caregivers must be attuned enough to read our body language and sounds to determine our needs. The more empathically attuned the parent, the safer the world seems and the more psychologically equipped the child becomes as it develops. Empathy is **crucial in relationship building** as it sparks connection. It helps to create safety and openness between individuals.

When someone expresses feelings concerning our behavior or an experience, it is better to focus and address the feelings that person is experiencing, not the behavior or details about the situations.

Empathy **requires active and open listening**. One must be willing to accept, without judgement or bias, what the other is communicating. One should be self-aware and able to suspend judgment about what is being told to them before they can begin to understand what the other person is feeling. Empathy is imaginatively placing oneself into the center of the other person's world in that moment and identifying the feeling that other is experiencing, then naming it. Once the feeling is identified, it should be reflected back to the person so that they can either confirm or reject it. If rejected...keep trying until it is confirmed.

Empathic responses consist of several components:
Acceptance, Being Non-judgmental, Understanding, and Reflective Response.

Acceptance means accepting everything the person is experiencing as their truth. This entails seeing the experience as the other sees it. Again, the listener must be not let their own bias and judgement get in the way. Condemnation, judgement, confrontation, problem solving, or expressing a different interpretation of the experience should never be attempted. Once acceptance has been achieved, the listener begins to understand the inner experience of the speaker.

Being **non-judgmental** is an important component in determining how to respond. Everyone has their own personal experiences to draw from in interpreting situations and the world. We may respond differently depending on our past experiences. Moving from our own subjective bias to a more objective acceptance of the person's experience lends to being non-judgmental.

Understanding the person's current feelings about their experience is another crucial component. This can include how they felt in the past if the situation they are relating to happened in the past. It can also include expressing how the person currently feels about the situation.

Reflective Response is the last component. Once the listener believes they understand the feelings of the person, they communicate that feeling. The listener may not always get it right the first time. It's okay. Keep trying until you do. Asking for more clarification of the situation is often helpful.

Once the person confirms that they feel understood, connection is created as the person's need to be understood is met. The understanding between you and the person brings about a sense of common humanity. When there is understanding between the two of you, the person feels a sense of belonging rather than isolation and disconnection from others.

On the following pages are vignettes of someone in distress. Imagine that the person in the vignette is speaking to you. Utilizing the four components discussed on the previous page, give an empathic response. Remember, the four components are: Acceptance, Being Non-judgmental, Understanding, and Reflective Response

You may utilize the following sentence stems to help convey empathy.

You're feeling...

Sounds...

Could it be that...

I wonder if...

What I guess I'm hearing is...

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm sensing...

Perhaps you're feeling...

As I hear it, you...

Let me see if I'm with you; you...

The message I'm getting is that...

So, you're feeling...

I hear you saying...

You must have felt...

Sample Vignette

Young Male:

I told my sister I was gay and she said my parents will freak out because of their religious beliefs. Now I have to tell them this weekend on semester break.

Possible responses:

“Sounds scary.” “You’re feeling judged.” “Perhaps you’re feeling worried about disappointing your parents.”

** Remember there can often be several possible responses. The idea is to keep trying until one lands with the person you are responding to.*

Vignettes

1

Mother of adult children

I know my children are busy, but I have not seen them in a long time. Seems like ages. They don’t even bother to call, email, or text!

2

Partner

I don’t think my partner loves me anymore. He says he does care, but he doesn’t pay attention to me, especially when we are with other people. Sometimes I wonder if he is ashamed of me.

3

Parent of pre-teens

When I was younger I swore that I would never yell at my children like my parents yelled at me. But here I am today yelling at my son and doing all the things I promised myself I would never do.

4

Mother on Welfare

The system is against people like me. People think that we drink, beat our kids, live off of welfare and take drugs.

5

Male eight grade student

I feel like I'm a real loser. In sports I've always had two left feet, and when they choose up sides, I'm always the last one chosen. A couple of times they've actually got into a fight over who doesn't have to choose me.

6

Latino Mother

Our children do better in school if they teach Spanish, not just English. We're afraid our children are behind because they don't understand English very good. And we don't know how to help them. Our people have been trying to get a bilingual program, but the school board does not give attention to us.

7

Immigrant in Detention Center

They treat you like an animal in here—herd you around like a damn cow. I know I should be patient, but there are some times I feel like I can't stand it any longer—like something's building up in me that's going to explode.

8

Male college student

My girlfriend says she's going to text me but she never does. I have to do all the texting or I would never hear from her. It's always me putting in the effort. Sometimes if I didn't need her so much, I'd confront her. Or sometimes I think she is pretty selfish.

9

Male starting a new job

I don't feel like I belong in this group. The rest of my coworkers seem to have better educations and come from better schools. Hell, I went to community college and barely finished State.

Possible Feelings

1

Mother of adult children

Unimportant, neglected, disappointed, hurt, rejected, abandoned, deprived, lonely, depressed.

2

Partner

Unloved, insecure, confused, embarrassed, Left out or excluded. Hurt, resentful, unvalued, rejected, taken for granted, degraded, doubting own desirability.

4

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3

Parent of pre-teens

Disappointed in self, discouraged, letting children down, perplexed, guilty, inadequate, crummy, sense of failure, out of control, fear of damaging children.

4

Mother on Welfare

Judged, apart from others, hopeless, demeaned, angry, degraded, bitter, belittled, branded, distressed, alienated, defeated, shut out, below par, excluded, dismissed.

5

Male eighth grade student

Shortchanged, humiliated, rejected, teased, emasculated, mistreated, degraded, put down, trapped, ashamed, cheated, embarrassed, misunderstood.

6

Latino Mother

Worried, taken lightly, degraded, discounted, discriminated, abandoned, excluded, alienated, isolated, desperate, scared, distrustful, doubtful, inferior, insignificant, disheartened, anguished, pessimistic, hopeless, frustrated, ridiculed, overlooked, neglected, inadequate.

7

Immigrant in Detention Center

Degraded, devalued, angry, cheapened, infuriated, exploited, terror-stricken, enraged, horrified, uncertain, mistreated, violent, abused, humiliated, discarded, abandoned.

8

Male college student

Lonely, abandoned, rejected, cut off, degraded, taken for granted, overlooked, mistreated, disconnected, insecure, perplexed, desperate, worried, threatened, panicky, frightened, uncertain, lacking confidence, insignificant, unwanted.

9

Male starting a new job

Uncomfortable, like you don't fit, not enough, less than, not belonging, rejected, judged.