

Empathy, Empathy, Two by Four, Can Help You Through The Heart's Little Door: Step #3 to Lovemaking Through Deep Listening

Empathy Section Outline

Introduction

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Introduction

"How could you do that to me!?" I heard that phrase, I mean really heard it, when I called my mother to tell her that I had decided to get a divorce from my doctor husband of 10 years.

I had received enough empathic responsiveness from therapy by then to know that her response was ever so self-centered. There was no concern for what I was going through, or for how it would impact my children, or even for my later-to-be my ex-husband.

I had known in my guts, thought not yet in my head, that any distress that her offspring had would be experienced by her as a betrayal- as treason, even. I knew not to expect any compassion.

That was then. Now, remembering the exchange is very funny to me; it's so outrageously unempathic. Now I can have compassion for the emotionally fragile woman, who had always longed to become an MD herself and who felt she needed academic status to feel worthwhile. Now I know in my bones the immeasurable difference it makes to receive and give empathy, and to do without it. And now I have a passion to make a difference to people deprived of empathy, people who still have to live with the daily disconnect and lasting loneliness.

The problem is, many people may have had little experience with being given empathy and don't know the difference. Well, maybe I can help some. That is the purpose of these articles on Deep Listening.

What is Empathy?

Webster defines empathy as: *n*(1904)The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or the present **without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated** directly.

Another definition: the ability to accurately understand and sensitively respond to the experience of another living being.

Examples of empathy

Imagine a toddler trying to walk over to a puppy, lose his balance and plop to the floor. His first response is a surprised look. An empathic mother might respond lightly: "Uh oh!" showing she understands that he made a surprise blooper- from his point of view. He didn't achieve the continuous walk he had intended. If she runs to him, shrieking, "Oh my God, you poor thing!" she is showing her own anxious point of view.

A more complex empathy might be with a teenage daughter who is pleading for an expensive prom dress, which the parents are unwilling to buy. Saying, "You want to feel special and look extra-beautiful on this very special night. And you want to fit in with what your friends are wearing" would be empathic. It shows that you understand her point of view. "Who do you think you are," or, "Money doesn't grow on trees," are not empathic responses. There's nothing about her point of view in either statement.

Or, to use a dating example, a woman-let's call her Judy, tells her live-in boyfriend that she is going to see the movie *Lars and the Real Girl* with her friend Sally that night. He heard her speak two weeks ago of getting free tickets to that movie from a movie survey company. When she comes in later than expected, her boyfriend is withdrawn. He tells her, "I remember that you got free tickets and went to that movie a couple of weeks ago. Judy empathically responds, "Since you thought I had already seen *Lars and the Real Girl*, I can imagine you thought I might be lying when I said I was going to see it with Sally. I can imagine it made you feel distrustful."

Spontaneous empathy

Empathy can sometimes seem to appear spontaneously. More often, there needs to be a deliberate effort to experience and express it.

Here's an example of the spontaneous version. Once as an old boyfriend and I were breaking up, he stood at my open front door as he was making his final exit, shouting, "And you can go to Hell!" As I told a girlfriend about that goodbye scene, she said, "How could you take being treated like that?" But I wasn't hurt by his uncharacteristic explosiveness. I had seen into his usually sweet blue eyes, I saw the pain there. I was not insulted or afraid. I understood.

Willed empathy

Empathy is usually, however, a controlled, intentional activity with a thoughtful, active and intelligent exploration. The focus is on what lies under the surface of another human being.

Empathy requires balance between over heatedness and frigidness. We must integrate feelings and thoughts in order to not get over aroused by our emotions. In an intense encounter, it requires that we slow down so that thoughts can catch up with our feelings.

Negative emotions like fear, anger, shame and guilt make high metabolic demands on our bodies. When there is a high physiological arousal, our focus narrows to allowing us to only see our own anger and fear and the widened perspective vanishes. We can get “blinded” by the emotions and concentrate only on surviving by fighting or running away and/or avoiding.

What makes empathy so important?

A basic everyday, all day human need is to be seen, heard and recognized for who we are. Not for how someone would like us to be. Not for how someone is trying to get us to be. But for who we are inside: Our feelings, thoughts, desires, and dreams.

Receiving and giving empathy meets that indestructible human need for recognition. Empathy is so appreciated by Sam Keen, author of *Fire in the Belly*, that he dubs it one of the Ten Heroic Virtues.

A good man does not have empathy, he is empathic. Since he has given up the illusion that he is self-contained, he naturally flows out to others. The result of coming to know myself—the wounds of shame and guilt, the disappointments of love, the unfulfilled dreams—is that I recognize the same in othersEmpathic men have stepped out of the hierarchical view of relationships—you are either one up or one down—they have become cobeings. You know immediately when you are with them because they don’t talk at you, don’t interrupt or give advice. They listen and stand beside you, and in their presence you have an uncanny experience that *you have been given permission to be yourself.*

We need to feel connected to each other. We need to feel we belong, are worthy of metaphorically being reached for, of being held. Keen goes on to say that empathy is not simply receptive. “[Empathic] Listening is the art by which we reach across the space between us. Passive attention does not work.”

We were born hardwired to feel our emotions. All of our feelings are survival mechanisms. When we pay attention to our feelings, and think about them, we can use them to help us understand what we need from moment to moment. With the knowledge of what we need, we can take action to meet those needs. When another person makes an attempt to guess or can sense and express what we feel, it brings us closer to being able to act upon what we need. That way we can meet our human obligation of taking good emotional care of our selves.

Pat Love & Steven Stosny, authors of *How to Improve Your Marriage without Talking About It*, say, “Developing the ability to experience the world through your partner’s eyes, while holding on to your perspective, may be the single most important skill in intimate relationships.”

“I have come to believe that empathy, more than any other human faculty, is the key to loving relationships and the antidote to the loneliness, fear, anxiety, and despair that affect the lives of so many people, ” writes Arthur Ciaramicoli in *The Power of Empathy*.

I’ve spent decades learning about the power of empathy to heal and support blossoming of the self, and relationships. And I have come to believe that love is the commitment to be willing to see any and everything from the other person’s point of view. To me, then, commitment to conscious empathy is real love.

Barriers to Giving Empathy

Our own impatience at having our needs for empathy temporarily unmet

One of the most difficult times to be empathic is when someone is misunderstanding us and not thinking well of us. We can feel a desperate need to explain why we did what ever we did, i.e., "I was just trying to help you." We may feel an urgency at least prove they are wrong about their opinion about us: "I didn't mean it that way!" Alternatively, we may want to prevent them from feeling pain, as in, "But I love you, how could you think I would do that."

But to really build the safe haven of relationships, we first need to connect before correcting their interpretation of our behavior. We connect by speaking of where they are emotionally before giving our point of view. Let's say you are an office supply salesman at a party with your new wife. A woman finds out what you do and starts telling you about a new recycled paper her company uses for their business cards.

At home, after the party, your wife is distressed at what she thinks is your flirting. The empathic path would have you saying something like, "Oh, so it seemed as if I was flirting with her when I leaned over and took her card. I can understand that. I wonder if you were afraid I was going to call her and ask her for a date." With empathy, you correct her understanding second. After verbalizing her viewpoint, you explain that the woman was telling you about a new recycled paper and that she was showing you her business card which was made of it.

The Desire to Punish 'Bad' Behavior of Others

Unfortunately many of us were raised with the idea that the most important, even the first thing to do when there is conflict, is to determine who is right and who is wrong, or who is innocent and who is guilty, who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. (Does the playground blurt, "You started it!" sound familiar?)

When one person "punishes" another by attack, or by withdrawal of either the self or of love, nothing helpful ever happens. A dramatic example is when one partner has an affair. The "bad"/punished one may stop an outward activity, but internally the resentment at feeling coerced and the fear of being treated without caring lingers on and on and on.

The person who "wins" by punishing and therefore stopping the other's behavior never really feels safe either. He/she knows the new behavior didn't come from a real owning of the different behavior. Understanding of what unmet needs or false beliefs underlay the affair needs to happen for real change to occur.

The Desire to Punish 'Bad' Behavior of Self

Just as unproductive as finding fault with the other, is the self flagellation that may occur after one learns his/her activities have triggered hurt in another. Let's say an adult child, in an attempt to find self respect by finally speaking up, tells his father of ways he was hurt in his childhood by constant criticism.

The father may deny that his son's view ever happened, he may turn and blame the adult child, "But you kept breaking the house rules!" The father may give his reasons, "My parents did the same with me, and I turned out all right, so I thought it would be good for you too."

But even more unproductive may be the father's crumbling into guilt and shame, "I know I was a terrible father; I never paid attention to anything but success. I feel terrible, I don't know how I can live with myself, I'm such a selfish person, I wish I were dead," etc. The conversation can get right back to focusing on the parent's pain- once again leaving the adult child's feelings and needs unseen, and unrecognized. In this case, what the adult child needs is to see the parent's pain, his real remorse about the fact that the adult child was hurt. Not that the parent is hurting about his own self.

The longer one is judging him/herself about his/her actions, the longer it will take to develop true understanding. It is the understanding of one's self that will give awareness that may lead to any desired change. And it is the understanding of self and other that helps to restore the hurt person's sense of wellbeing.

The fear of rewarding or encouraging Bad Behavior

When I was growing up, there was much interest in "conditioning" good behavior. There was a belief that if one responded with warmth to another's pain, it only made the person express more pain to get more sympathy. "If I try to understand him, he'll keep coming home late!" is the belief.

I remember getting sick just once when I still lived in my parents' house. I was fourteen, too sick to go downstairs to eat, sitting propped up against some pillows, waiting for my unwanted lunch to be brought upstairs by my mother. I saw her walk across the room towards me with a tray in her hands. As she leaned down to place the tray on my lap, she rammed the tray into my stomach. I cried out in shock, "Why did you do that?" She scowled back, "I don't want to condition you to be sick by rewarding you!"

The belief is that if someone is treated kindly when they do something that doesn't please us, they will just do the 'bad' thing more. The desire is to control the behavior of the other. Many people have rules about how other people should act and think that the others are 'bad' if they do not act according to their own rules.

I have heard parents say "Ignore him. He just wants attention." To me this is similar to saying, "Don't feed him. He is just hungry." I've even heard hospital personnel say, "She's just trying to manipulate us by threatening suicide, so I'll just say, 'go ahead, jump!'"

Judging others because of not having empathy for our self

If you have a personal rule about never getting angry, you will probably judge others when they are angry. You will try to get them to stop, or will want to get away. If you are not comfortable showing tenderness, you will be embarrassed with saying lovey things, and will inwardly criticize others when they do. If you are not comfortable with the natural human need for attention, you will be critical when you see others trying to get attention. And on and on. We cannot recognize someone else's needs as legitimate, if we think we should not have that need.

We may forget that no one person can possibly evaluate another's feelings or needs. We simply do not know enough.

Barriers to receiving empathy

Confusion about empathy, sympathy, and pity

Most people do not want to feel less strong, capable, or intelligent than others. When we are feeling the vulnerability of distress, fear, sadness or anxiety, the responses of other people to our feelings can make us feel better or worse. Being looked down on will make us feel worse.

Pity is a separating emotion. "Oh, your poor thing!" might be one thing one might express when feeling pity. Few people want to feel pitiful, or pathetic. Pity is often condescending and may include feelings of superiority, contempt (disgust and anger) and rejection.

Sympathy is when one person feels the feelings of the sufferer as if he or she were the sufferer. Sympathy is automatic, involuntary response to another's emotional state, while empathy requires much more of an advanced integration of thought and feeling.

If someone feels the sadness of another which arouses his/her own unacceptable sadness, he/she may try to stop the sadness of the other so he/she won't have to feel the pain.. This indicates not only lack of empathy for the self and other, but a lack of a healthy boundary as a separate (but relating) person.

Sympathy is thus shared suffering. Sympathy often seeks to console, while empathy seeks to understand. In sympathy, one's own past is brought in as in "I remember when _____(some past experience, i.e. "when MY father died") I was incapacitated for months!"

The person sympathizing may, over time, feel burdened or burned out. To look at the other side of the sympathy equation, the one being sympathized with may feel as if they are causing pain to the sympathizer, and feel guilty.

In empathy, no past is spoken about. The only thing present is the other person's experience, feelings, and story. As Kelly Bryson says in *Don't Be Nice, Be Real: Balancing Passion For Self With Compassion For Others*, "Relating to another's experience is about you. Empathizing is about them."

Empathy happens when one person understands the other's plight and at the same time maintains a healthy emotional distance. Active thinking is required to calm possible emotional reactivity. The automatic impulse to judge and criticize must be put aside.

Empathy is concerned with a much higher order of human relationship and understanding: engaged detachment. In the above example of the toddler the mom was not shocked herself, but could see her child's surprise. In empathy, we "borrow" another's feelings to observe, feel, and understand them--but not to take them onto ourselves. By being a participant-observer, we come to understand how the other person feels. An empathetic observer enters into the equation and then is removed.

Since the empathizer is not taking the other's feelings personally, the empathizer does not feel that he/she has "caused" the other's feelings and thus react with anger, shame or guilt.

When a need is met, a vulnerable tenderness may show up

In my clinical practice, I often find that when a client's unrecognized need is met, there are tears. Tears of gratitude, relief, sadness at the former deprivation. Last week, in a difficult call to my client's teacher, I defended the validity of my client's point of view. After the call, my client, sobbed, "No one has ever stuck up for me like that. Thank you"

A personal example: In the 70's, I, a cigarette-smoking San Francisco artist, had recently broken up with my boyfriend and was lonely and depressed. I had gone for an initial interview for therapy at a local clinic. The interview was confronting, and to comfort myself, I rummaged in my purse for a cigarette. I dug and dug but couldn't find my lighter. When the male interviewer asked, leaning over with a book of matches, "Would you like a light?" I burst into tears at his kindness, which I had not felt for so long.

People who have difficulty with empathy often also have difficulty allowing themselves or others to show tenderness, softness, or vulnerability of any kind.

The learning curve for developing empathy skill

We are born hard wired for empathy. Even newborns evidence a low order of empathy. When one baby in the hospital nursery cries, the whole room starts crying. However, although we have a genetic predisposition to feel other's distress and a desire to remove their discomfort, the skill of verbal empathy needs focused attention and practice.

The challenge of learning advanced empathic skills

For people who are beginning to be conscious of this skill, it can be very difficult.

- Many people experience difficulty slowing themselves down when they have been used to free wheeling through sometimes unprofitable verbal expressions.
- Some people who have been over controlled by others may initially experience resentment at having to follow a structure of communicating.
- At times some people feel as if they are "submitting" when they temporarily put their own biases aside to see another point of view.
- To master the art and skill of empathy requires practice, and many people have the belief that talking to others should just come naturally, without effort.
- Finally, it can be frustrating as one inevitably makes mistakes.

Steps toward skilled empathy

I am hoping that you will be empathic towards yourself as you increase your empathic abilities. We don't suddenly become proficient when we have learned other less useful practices and then spent a lifetime using them.

Our ability to be empathic may fluctuate based upon our emotional state at the time, the state of any particular relationship, and our stage of skill development. Below are the common steps along the way to mastering empathy.

Below is a list of the stages and skills in the development of empathy.

Basic empathy

- Inborn, no effort required

Novice

- Sensing others' global emotions, includes sympathy- sensing other's feelings by remembering one's self

Advanced novice

- Learning facts, rules, applications of empathy
- Practice and failure as receiving feedback
- Feelings of other are felt and distinguished as different from the self
- Reception & reflection are experienced
- Exploration beyond the known is possible

Skilled empathy

- Reception and reflection are increased
- What to focus on is understood consciously

Proficient empathy

- Feeling the other at a deeper level
- Multiple levels of feelings and issues are experienced
- Empathy quicker
- Problem solving is faster since the person knows what needs to be done

Expert empathy

- The experiences of flow and oneness with the person empathized with

Kelly Bryson, author of *Don't Be Nice Be Real: Balancing Passion for Self with Compassion for Others* gives an example of expert empathy in difficult exchange. To another's statement, "You don't care about me!" An empathic, compassionate comeback would be, "Are you feeling hurt and needing some indication that you do matter to me?"

Bryson gives a structure for empathic responses to others' distress towards us:
When you saw (remembered, or heard) _____ did you
feel _____ because you were wanting _____? And would you like
me to _____?

Conclusion

Much has been written about empathy. What happens when we don't give it (pain). What happens when we don't get it (pain). A whole school of psychotherapy is based upon it- Self Psychology. Self psychology emphasizes the need for empathy in building and maintaining a robust and joyful self. Heinz Kohut, who founded the theory of Self Psychology calls empathy the "oxygen" of life. We never outgrow our need for it.

Our basic human needs for attention, recognition, closeness, separateness, and belonging are all met through empathy. I am committed to practicing it, and I urge you to "go forth and empathize."

Love,
Jane