

COMMUNICATION

# Expressing empathy

**LEVEL**

Upper-Intermediate  
(B2)

**NUMBER**

EN\_B2\_1073X

**LANGUAGE**

English



## Learning outcomes

- I can identify and recall some expressions to show empathy.
- I can respond empathically to someone in a difficult situation.



## Warm-up

**How would you  
define *empathy*?**

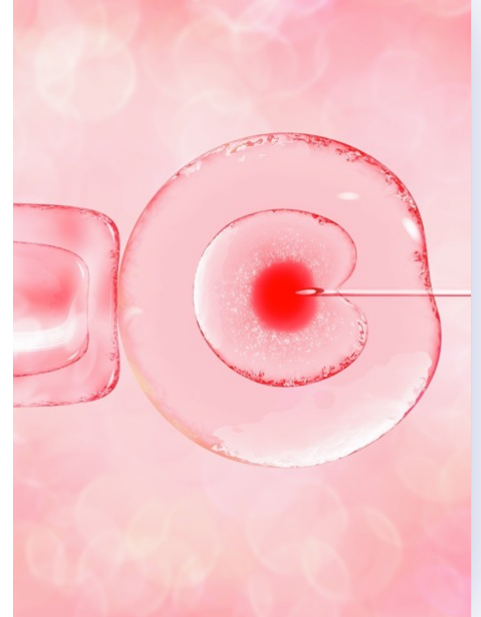
**Discuss in breakout rooms or  
together as a class!**



# What is empathy?

Imagine a friend rings you to tell you that her partner of thirty years has suddenly decided to end their marriage and **leave** her. Or, that her third round of **IVF** that cost thousands of pounds hasn't worked, and as a result, she won't ever be able to have children.

When faced with someone in an extremely difficult situation, we can choose to respond in one of two ways: with **empathy** or with **sympathy**. But, what exactly is the difference?



1. Explain one challenging situation mentioned in the text.
2. Give two possible ways to respond to a person going through that situation.



# What is empathy?

According to Dr Brené Brown, “empathy fuels connection; sympathy **drives** disconnection”. Empathy, she says, is the ability to feel *with* people and involves understanding and recognising their feelings, even if you think *you* would feel differently.

Sympathy simply involves feeling *bad* for people, but being unable or **unwilling** to relate to this person. For Brown, sympathy creates distance between us and the person suffering; empathy creates connection.



3. How does Dr Brown say empathy differs from sympathy?
4. Which ability does she say brings us closer to another person?

# What is empathy?

Why is this distinction important? Well, according to Brown, when faced with difficult situations, most people aren't looking for a magic **response** that will fix everything.

Chances are they are looking for someone who can help them feel less alone in their situation or for someone who has been through something similar. In short, what they're looking for is connection. And, for her, that's what empathy is all about.



5. In difficult situations, what do we **not** want from another person according to Dr Brown?
6. How guilty are you of offering 'magic responses' to other people?



# Reflect on the text



**Empathy fuels connection;  
sympathy drives disconnection.**

Do you agree with  
Dr Brown's  
distinction or not?

Why or why not?

How closely does  
her definition of  
empathy match  
yours from the  
warm-up?





# What about you?

**Can you think of a time when someone showed empathy towards you?**



**How did it make you feel?**







# Expressing empathy



Your friend

**I just can't believe he's leaving me!**



You

**You must be feeling so confused by this.**

- Think back to this example from the text.
- We can use **this structure** to show we recognise how the friend might be feeling in that situation.
- Let's learn more about this!

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



# Phrases for expressing empathy

**Match** the beginnings and endings of the phrases.

1

*Thank you for...*

a

...left you feeling angry and upset.

2

*I bet that's...*

b

...you're feeling hurt and confused.

3

*I can understand why...*

c

...to what you're saying.

4

*I would definitely...*

d

... sharing that with me.

5

*I can really relate...*

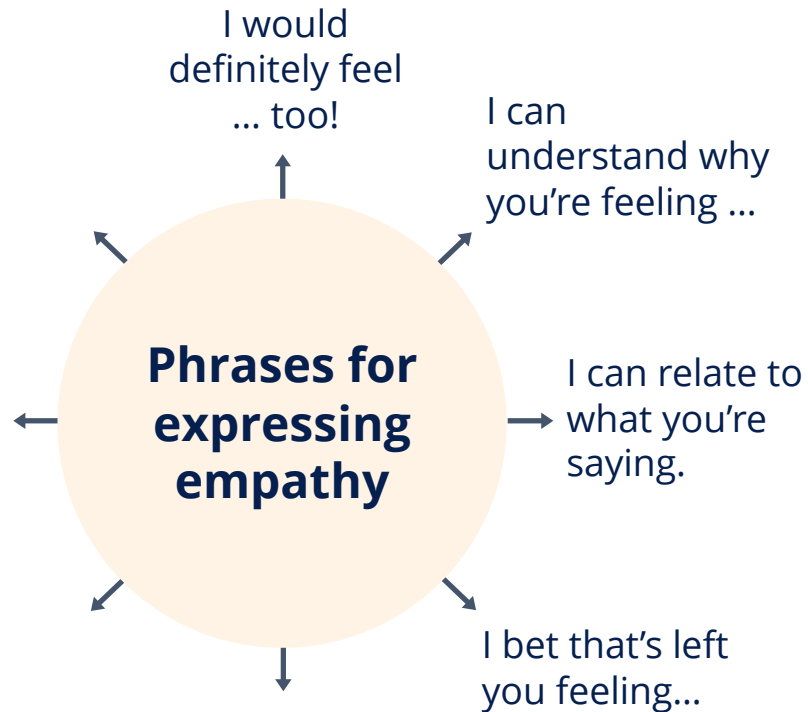
e

...feel annoyed in that situation too.



# Expressing empathy

**Brainstorm** any other phrases for expressing empathy. **Work** as a group.





# Putting empathy into practice

**Match** the tips with the correct explanation.

**Let them talk freely**

**Focus on feelings not judgment**

**Express yourself sincerely**

**Keep your body language in mind**

- A** Avoid giving them empty responses or false optimism. And, of course, don't give 'magic solutions' to their problems!
- B** Maintain eye contact with them while they are speaking and shift your eyebrows up to show you are paying attention to them.
- C** Allow the other person to openly express how they're feeling. Listen to them actively and avoid interrupting them!
- D** Put your viewpoints aside and concentrate solely on understanding how the person must have felt in that particular situation.



**What do you think?**

**Which of the tips  
did you find the  
most useful?**

**Do you have any other tips for  
putting empathy into practice?**







# Role-play

1. **Work** in pairs and **choose** a character below.
2. **Role-play** a conversation between the character and a close friend.

## Frank

Recently lost his job and is worried about his future.

## Alice

Has started a new job and is being bullied by a colleague.

## Lydia

Her mother is extremely sick and lives in a different country.

## John

Broke his leg at the beginning of a skiing holiday he had waited 2 years for.

## Tamara

Her flat flooded in an accident and her insurance is refusing to help her.



As the friend, respond with **empathy** to the other person!



## Discuss

**Why is showing empathy quite difficult sometimes?**

**Would you call yourself a naturally empathic person or not?**





- Can you respond empathically to someone in a difficult situation?

# End of the lesson

Idiom

***to put yourself in somebody's shoes***

**Meaning:** to imagine that you are in another person's (difficult or unpleasant) situation

**Example:** Well, what would you do? **Put yourself in my shoes!**



# Additional practice





# Fill in the gaps

**Choose** the correct verb to form a complete sentence.

- 1 Thanks for \_\_\_\_\_ that with me.
- 2 I \_\_\_\_\_ that's left you feeling really frustrated.
- 3 I can completely \_\_\_\_\_ why you're feeling upset by this.
- 4 I \_\_\_\_\_ probably feel angry and confused too.
- 5 I really \_\_\_\_\_ to what you just said. Can you tell me more?

understand  
would  
relate  
bet  
sharing





# What do you think?

**Why is empathy an important skill at work?**



**Have you worked for a highly empathic leader before?**



# Discuss



**Some people are simply naturally more empathic than others. It's a difficult skill to teach.**

Do you agree with this statement or not?

Do you know anyone who is highly empathic?

How can we encourage others to be more empathic?





# Answer key

- P. 4-6:**
1. A friend's relationship ending; failed IVF treatment; being unable to have kids.
  2. Responding with sympathy or with empathy.
  3. She says empathy fuels connections; sympathy drives disconnection.
  4. Empathy.
  5. A magic response that will fix everything.

- P. 10:**
1. d, 2. a, 3. b, 4. e, 5. c

- P. 11: Suggested ideas:**

That sounds extremely frustrating/disappointing/confusing.

That must have made you feel so...

I can see you're upset/delighted/frustrated by this.

That's totally understandable!

I bet!



# Answer key

**P. 12:**      **Let them talk freely: C**  
                 **Focus on feelings not judgment: D**  
                 **Express yourself sincerely: A**  
                 **Keep your body language in mind: B**

**P. 19:**      1. sharing  
                 2. bet  
                 3. understand  
                 4. would  
                 5. relate







# Summary

## Vocabulary related to empathy

- *empathy; sympathy; to leave someone; to drive; unwilling; magic response.*
- **Empathy** fuels connection; **sympathy** on the other hand **drives** disconnection.

## Phrases for expressing empathy

- *You must be feeling...*
- *I would definitely feel... too*
- *I can understand why you're feeling...*
- *I can relate to what you're saying...*
- *I bet that's left you feeling...*

## Tips for putting empathy into practice

- *You should let the person **talk freely** and keep your **body language** in mind.*
- *It's a good idea to also **focus on feelings** and **not judgment** and to express yourself **sincerely**.*



# Vocabulary

empathy

sympathy

to leave someone

to drive

unwilling

magic response

You must be feeling...

I would definitely feel ... too

I can understand why you're feeling...

I can relate to what you're saying...

I bet that's left you feeling...

to talk freely

body language

to focus on feelings

judgment

sincerely

