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Title: Using the Empathy Map to Design an Emotionally Supportive App for Educational Communities

In our final project, my team and I developed an idea for an application that supports emotional well-being within educational institutions. Initially focused on students, the goal evolved into creating a standardized emotional support tool that could also serve parents, teachers, and administrative staff. To better understand the needs of these users, I applied the Empathy Map, a Design Thinking tool that focuses on understanding what users think, feel, say, and do.

I conducted informal interviews with classmates and a teacher to explore emotional challenges in academic life. Students expressed a desire to feel heard and supported, often stating things like, "I wish I had someone to talk to, but I don't want to seem weak." Teachers mentioned feeling overwhelmed but having no emotional outlet. These insights were crucial in shaping our vision for the app: it had to be more than informative—it had to be emotionally intelligent.

The Empathy Map revealed a consistent emotional gap. In the "Thinking" quadrant, users felt they had to hide their emotions to remain "professional" or "strong." In the "Feeling" space, there was stress, fear, and loneliness. In "Saying," phrases like "I'm fine" or "Just tired" appeared often—masking deeper emotional needs. In "Doing," people isolated themselves, avoided asking for help, and often tried to "push through" without support.

These findings made us realize that the app must normalize vulnerability. One key feature we added was a direct channel to licensed psychologists, available through the university. We also included anonymous emotional check-ins and a digital "safe space" where users can journal, get personalized resources, or simply be heard.

The challenge was creating something that felt personal while being scalable and usable by multiple types of users. We didn't want the app to feel like a cold tool or just another task. Using the Empathy Map helped us design from a place of compassion, not assumption.

This process deeply changed how I approach problem-solving. Instead of asking, "What do users need?" I now ask, "How do users feel?" and that changes everything. By understanding emotions first, solutions become not just useful—but meaningful.

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In the future, I want to continue designing tech with empathy at the core. This reflection, and the Empathy Map in particular, helped me see how emotional data is just as important as technical data. I believe this approach can change not only how we design apps, but how we design entire institutions.