



# Empathy

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### Definition

Empathy is the ability to perceive another person's view of the world as though it were your own. It involves perspective taking and suspending judgment. You gain a sense of the feelings of others. When we develop empathy, we develop the capacity to feel the needs, ambitions, hopes, frustrations, hurts, pain and hunger of others...as if they were our own.

Empathy is not the same as sympathy.

**Sympathy** means you feel compassion for another's situation.

**Empathy** means you have a sense of what that situation is like.

We feel sympathy only when we accept the reasons for another's pain as valid. We can feel empathy without sympathy and without agreeing with the reasons for the pain.

Getting in touch with our own feelings and needs is a pre-requisite for empathy. With empathy, our intent is to connect with the other person, to meet their needs in this situation. Empathy involves being *with* the other.

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### The Platinum Rule

The **Platinum Rule** involves doing unto others as they would have done unto them. It requires us to understand how others think and what they want before we decide how to act. It implies empathy and acknowledges that different cultures may have different wants and needs. This approach helps us recognize that what others want may differ from what we would want.

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### Hearing the Unhearable

Expressing empathy sometimes involves "hearing the unheard." We sometimes have to be quiet, listen, and imagine the needs of others. Receiving empathically involves listening with the whole being.

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*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.  
I'll meet you there.*

~ Rumi

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## Shift of Focus

Questions drawn from  
Marshall Rosenberg

The empathic listener totally suspends judgment, focusing on identifying with and understanding the speaker. The empathic listener attempts to not only hear what is said, but to understand the thoughts and feelings not said. The empathic listener avoids responding with personal views or opinions or reactions.

Marshall Rosenberg (*Nonviolent Communications*) suggests questions such as these to help focus on what someone else is feeling rather than our own needs:

- “Would you be willing to help me understand...?”
- “I’m curious about how you’re feeling about...”
- “I’m wondering if you’re also feeling...”

To clarify your understanding:

- “I imagine you feel...”

Many factors affect our ability to empathize. We need to be sensitive to nonverbal cues, as well as to listen for the verbal messages. We can practice and develop the skills of empathy.

Understanding and supporting does not necessarily mean accepting or approving. Showing sensitivity and empathy is not the same as condoning or approving.

One way to improve our ability to express empathy is to take time to communicate. Simply scheduling time to listen or arranging a setting conducive to conversation may be an important step in demonstrating caring. Sometimes that’s as simple (or as difficult) as turning off the television or shutting down the computer.



## **The Pillow Method**

### **Perception Checking**

The **Pillow Method** is a tool for perception checking and can be useful when there is difficulty in understanding another person's point of view (empathy).

**Position 1: I'm right, you're wrong.** Most common perspective; often used when viewing a perspective unlike our own. There is a tendency to see the good qualities in our own thinking, but discount any thinking contrary to our own.

**Position 2: You're right, I'm wrong.** Provides the opportunity to see the strengths and merit in a view that is different than your own.

**Position 3: Both right, both wrong.** Allows acknowledgement of strengths and weaknesses of both persons' point of view. Presents an opportunity to find commonalities and become aware that there is not an absolute right or wrong.

**Position 4: The issue is not as important as it seems.** Doesn't matter which position is right and which is wrong. Can we learn to accept differences?

**Position 5: There is truth in all perspectives.** Affirms the fact of some truth in all positions.

Adapted from:

Adler, R. B., & Towne, N. (2002). *Looking out looking in* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). (pp. 125-129). Orlando, FL: Harcourt.