

Empathy stands for - letting go of our presumptions and listening without evaluation. It is beautifully described by this Buddhist saying: "Don't just do something, stand there. It sounds simple, yet it is a difficult skill to master. When we need it, we realize that our inherent programming kicks in to give uncalled-for advice or reassurances instead.

Since our childhood, we have learned that our ultimate goal is to fix things.

Don't be a part of the problem, be a part of the solution

This kind of conditioning instills the fundamental belief in our value system that we need to fix an issue to make others feel better.

Here are a few examples:

- When a friend is telling you the story of his heartbreak, there is a strong urge to say to him "move on mate, it happens". Don't you think he knows that already, but at that moment he doesn't want to move on? He wants you to understand his pain.
- When a colleague is telling you about her not-so-good performance appraisal output, and you have the strong urge to blurt out that "it doesn't matter in the long run". Don't you think she is smart enough to know this already?
- When your spouse is talking about a political situation at work, and you end up one-upping "That's nothing, wait till you hear what happened in my office". Believe me, when I say this, you will not have much to say after this, true story :)

We "say a lot" by listening to others' feelings and needs.

Carl Rogers, a famous American psychologist, describes

When someone hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good!

A key ingredient for empathy is being present and actively listening to someone. The goal is not to be either an intellectual or a fixer in this situation.

To do this, we should remove some of the most common statements from our vocabulary, such as:

- Cheering up statements - "Don't worry it will be alright..."

Don't belittle the sentiment instead feel the vulnerability that they are sharing. Don't shut them down!

- Sympathizing statements - "Oh this must be so painful for you..."

There is no time ever when we need to show sympathy. Sympathy is judgemental vs. empathy is not. Sympathy is imposing your perspective on the situation, whereas empathy is active listening.

- Solutioning statements - "Why don't you try this...?"

Let's get rid of the habit of assuming responsibility for their feelings and shifting into solutioning mode. If needed, solutions can come later.

- Gathering more information statements - When did this start...?

Questions are sometimes needed to get more information. However, questions need to be non-judgemental and out of your natural curiosity. Questions should not become emotional crutches that we use to sound intelligent. It also might lock that person up because they may not want to answer uncomfortable questions.

- Taking up the narrative statements - "This situation reminds me of the time when I..."

You might be a good storyteller, but you can't just talk yourself out of every situation. It is their story let them tell it.

- If I would be in your shoe statements - "If I would have been in your place..."

Please don't take the definition of empathy so literally. You can't be in anybody else's shoes as you will not have the context, experience, or understanding of their situation. You are only super-imposing your perspective on their scenario and force-feeding your analysis. Stop it!

Now you see how difficult this is right! Since most of the stuff that we rely on in these situations is not of much help.

Instead, we can focus on what the other person needs. It is that need which we can fulfill!

- Sometimes it is enough to stay silent and speak through your eyes.
- Give your full undivided attention to them. No cellphone, no wandering gaze. Give them steady eye contact and listen

- Let them talk, rant, or vent out. Give them enough time to finish what they want to say
- Ask a question only if you need to understand more of the context
- Summarize your understanding to them by paraphrasing and confirming it

The beauty is that most of the time they will find out their own solutions whilst talking to you. So even if you did very little in the conversation, the other person might not see it that way. If you want more info, read the book [Nonviolent Communication](#) by Marshall B. Rosenberg. It is an excellent book that made me realize how emotionally inept I was at empathizing, and it is also a heavy influence on this blog post.

The more we empathize, the more we can take

Empathy also is a two-way street. The more you exercise it, the more you feel at ease sharing your pain as well. The more you connect with the feeling behind the word of others, the less terrifying it becomes to share your own feelings.

All in all, we can do a lot better with more empathy and way less sympathy in this world!

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