

Key Principles of Empathy

The power of the present. When someone is talking about the past or the future, focus on what is going on for them in the moment, as they are speaking- and experiencing their thoughts.

Empathy vs. expression. Empathy is about the speaker not us. We stay focused on what is going on for them rather than sharing what is going on for us.

Following vs. leading. We follow what the person says is going on for them rather than leading them toward what we think is important.

Connection before outcome. Empathy occurs when we understand and connect with the speaker. It is not about helping them feel better or trying to change anything for them.

Empathy guesses. We guess what the person's experience is rather than telling them what we think they are experiencing. We guess because we want to understand. The speaker is our GPS system. We watch the speaker's reaction to see whether our guess was accurate and adjust.

We don't need the details. Our own need for understanding does not have to be met in order for the speaker's need for empathy to be met.

Empathy is a choice. During an interaction, there may be times when we do not want to empathize with someone. We may want to focus on self-empathy or express ourselves to them. Empathy is a strategy to meet your needs and the needs of others, one of many in any moment.

Empathy takes practice. Most of us did not learn how to be present and understand another's experience. Empathy is a learnable skill. We can practice it, and we can get better at it.

Elements of Empathy

Presence -resting your awareness and listening attention on the speaker

-emptying your mind of thoughts by focusing your attention on things like the rhythm and tone of the speaker's words, the spaces between their words and sentences, and visually taking in their nonverbal body language and communication without thinking, labeling, etc.

Silent Empathy -silently listening for the heart of the matter for them, and listening for or guessing feelings and needs.

Understanding/Meaning -reflecting back to the speaker what you're hearing them say in a way you guess they would like to be heard.

-reflect how they are seeing things from their perspective, from their subjective frame of reference and experience.

-reflect back some of their thoughts, but thoughts as observations, observing with the person their thoughts about the situation.

Need Language -focusing your listening attention and verbal reflection on the needs alive in this person as they are speaking, and connecting their thoughts and feelings and specific wants to their needs.

-you may be reflecting back the feelings and needs you are hearing in what the person is already expressing, or you might guess and translate thoughts and feelings to the needs you are sensing underneath.

-be aware of "faux feelings" and translate them into words that name a bodily sensation or feeling.