

Empathic Communication

What is empathy?

Empathy is an effort to listen to, understand, and validate another person's feelings, without taking on those feelings.

What is sympathy?

Sympathy is about feeling sorry for another person's trouble, and/or trying to minimize or fix the problem.

Tips for using empathy

- Empathy should be used all the time in order to enhance communication and prevent conflict. Sympathy, while needed, can be emotionally draining, since the person takes on the feelings of pain and suffering from the other person.
- Recognize and accept the presence of strong feelings in conversations. For example, it may be obvious that someone you are talking to is sad, angry, or frustrated.
- Try and imagine how the other person is feeling. Think of some words that would describe how you would feel if placed in the other person's situation.
- State your perception of the person's feelings:
 - "It sounds like you are..."
 - "I imagine that must be..."
 - "I can understand this must make you feel..."
- Do not discount how a person is feeling.
 - Avoid phrases such as, "It could always be worse."
- Respect the other person's efforts in coping with the situation at hand.
 - "I've noticed you've been working hard at adjusting to the change in the workflow."
- Be a partner.
 - "How can I support you in getting through this change?"

Empathy in Action

Client: “I’m really angry that you can’t find me an appointment sooner than three weeks. I need to be seen today!”

Possible response: “I understand this is disappointing. Let me see if I can find other options to get you in sooner.”

Coworker: “They are always changing things in the Call Center. How do they expect us to follow all the rules, when they change every week?”

Possible response: “You’re right - it has been hard. I wonder what we can do to help?”

Community Partner: “The information you just gave me is different than the information I was given last week -- this is frustrating; I really need to make sure I’m getting the right information.”

Possible response: “I’m sorry that happened to you. Let me look into it and get back to you with the right information.”