

Chapter 9

Empathy: How Much Do You Care?



An article published by NASA's Career Management Office tells the story of an old woman who died in the geriatric ward of a small hospital in Scotland. After her death, the nurses went through her belongings and found the poem reproduced below.

*What do you see, nurses, what do you see?
What are you thinking when you're looking
at me?*

*A crabby old woman, not very wise,
Uncertain of habit, with faraway eyes?
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply,
When you say in a loud voice, "I do wish
you'd try!"*

*Who seems not to notice the things that you
do,
And forever is losing a stocking or shoe.
Who, resisting or not, lets you do as you
will,
With bathing and feeding, the long day to
fill...
Is that what you're thinking? Is that what
you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse; you're not
looking at me.
I'll tell you who I am as I sit here so still,
As I do at your bidding, as I eat at your will.
I'm a small child of ten ... with a father and
mother,
Brothers and sisters, who love one another.
A young girl of sixteen, with wings on her
feet,
Dreaming that soon now a lover she'll meet.
A bride soon at twenty – my heart gives a
leap,
Remembering the vows that I promised to
keep.
At twenty-five now, I have young of my own,
Who need me to guide and secure a happy
home.
A woman of thirty, my young now grown
fast,
Bound to each other with ties that should
last.*

*At forty, my young sons have grown and are
gone,*

*But my man's beside me to see I don't
mourn.*

*At fifty, once more babies play round my
knee,*

*Again we know children, my loved one and
me.*

*Dark days are upon me, my husband is
dead.*

I look at the future, I shudder with dread.

*For my young are all rearing young of their
own,*

*And I think of the years and the love that I've
known.*

*I'm now an old woman ... and nature is
cruel;*

'Tis jest to make old age look like a fool.

*The body, it crumbles, grace and vigor
depart,*

*There is now a stone where I once had a
heart.*

*But inside this old carcass a young girl still
dwells,*

*And now and again my battered heart
swells.*

I remember the joys, I remember the pain,

And I'm loving and living life over again.

*I think of the years ... all too few, gone too
fast,*

*And accept the stark fact that nothing can
last.*

*So open your eyes, nurses, open and see,
Not a crabby old woman; look closer, see
ME!!*

The cry of every heart is to be appreciated for who he or she is . Receiving or not receiving such recognition marks the difference between the pain of loneliness and the fullness of life. The sense of isolation described in this poem is something couples must avoid. The more we can empathize with our spouse's experience, the more connected we will be.



The first video from the Cleveland Clinic attempts to evoke the empathy of the watcher. The second video from Brene Brown further defines what empathy is:

Cleveland Clinic

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj_q-o8

Dr. Brene Brown:

<https://brenebrown.com/videos/rsa-short-empathy/>



Contemplate

How Empathetic is Your Spouse?

When I share my feelings, my spouse:

- a1. is as responsive as a brick wall.
- a2. doesn't get how I feel.
- a3. tells me I am overreacting or that I need to calm down.
- a4. tries to change the subject.
- a5. gets stressed by them.
- a6. becomes hostile toward me.

- b7. talks about his/her feelings instead of mine.
- b8. responds in an artificial, mechanical, or contrived way.
- b9. barely acknowledges how I feel.
- b10. wants to understand but fails to connect empathetically.

- c11. pays attention to me and is present with me in the moment.
- c12. mirrors back to me what I am feeling but does not go deeper.
- c13. sees things from my frame of reference.

- d14. has no agenda other than to understand how I am feeling.
- d15. interacts with how I am feeling.

- ___ d16. asks clarifying questions.
- ___ d17. physically comforts me.
- ___ e18. understands exactly how I feel and where I am coming from.
- ___ e19. provides the experience for me to “feel felt.”



Discuss

1. Share how you responded to the above questions with your spouse. Are you surprised by your mate’s answers?

Scoring: The questions are arranged from least empathetic categories (a) to most empathetic (e). Empathy doesn’t appear until letter (c).

2. What do you wish your partner could see or understand about you, but hasn't? What would surprise your partner to learn about you?
3. If your partner was more empathetic, how would it affect you?
4. Discuss are the one or two top things your spouse could do to show you more empathy.

Illustration

The following cartoon illustrating empathy is from the best-selling book, “How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk” ([Amazon link](#)) by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazish.



Authors: *It's strange. When we urge a child to push a bad feeling away – however kindly – the child seems to get only more upset.*



Authors: *Parents don't usually give this kind of response because they fear that by giving a name to the feeling, they'll make it worse. Just the opposite is true. The child who hears the words for what she is experiencing is deeply comforted. Someone has acknowledged her.*



Exercise

HOW to Empathize with Your Spouse, Not Fix the Problem

The **Goal** of this exercise is not to change your partner's reality but to **enter** into it.

Directions

One **talking spouse** will share a situation they are experiencing. For example,

My boss is ridiculously demanding.

The **listening spouse** will then engage in the following activities.

- (1) Use sounds/words such as, *mmm* and *I see*, and their body language (eye contact, nodding of head) to show their **engagement**.
- (2) Think of a word that describes the expressed emotion, e.g., *frustration*, and use it in a sentence to show your understanding.

It sounds like your boss is a genuine source of frustration for you.

Note: Should you name the wrong emotion, no worries. Your spouse will correct you.

- (3) Focus on that emotion (frustration) and ask follow-up questions such as:

Tell me more about what you're feeling.

Have you felt this way before?

What other related emotions are you experiencing?

What sensations do you feel in your body?

What are you saying to yourself when you feel this way?

How may this experience impact you going forward?

(4) End by saying, *If I had the power...*

If I had the power, I would fire the man and bring back your old boss.

Take turns practicing the above sequence until it feels more natural to you. Then engage in it in the following extended story.

An Extended Exercise



According to the book, [*Who Walk Alone*](#) (1940), Ned Langford was an American who fought in the Spanish-American War in the Philippines in 1898. Nine years after he returned home and just months before he was to marry Jane, Ned learned that he had contracted leprosy in the Philippines. After secretly seeing many doctors to diagnose and treat his condition, Ned went to a New York City specialist. Ned lived there for a year in

isolation. Other than his younger brother, Tom, no one knew of Ned's condition. In fact, to spare his family and fiancé, Ned staged his suicide so others could get on with their lives. Soon after arriving in the city, he drove his car into the Hudson River at 2 am. He left enough identifying papers behind so the police could identify the victim, who they assumed was carried away by the current. At the end of the year of fruitless treatment, Ned wrote this letter to his brother, which I have edited and shortened.

Instructions

To start, **Partner A reads the first three paragraphs.** Partner B will read the last three paragraphs. At the end of each paragraph, the listening partner will reflect what was said using the structure provided in the chart above. See how well you can empathize with each other in this moving story.

Tom,

I've reached the end. It's insane for me to attempt to go on longer with this farce. I've clung in stupid desperation to the thought that I would grow better, that I must grow better. I've refused, hour by hour, to believe that such a thing could or was actually happening to me. For almost one year it has gone on just like that, hour by hour. Yes, minute following minute, every interminable waking minute

trying to calm myself into believing that it wasn't happening, that it couldn't happen to me any more than it could happen to you, or mother, or Jane. Every foot of every block of the city streets that I have paced week in and week out, month in and month out, can testify to the prayers that I have breathed.

Partner B Reflect Up to This Point

But it has happened, Tom. Incredible as it is, it has happened to me. I'm a leper, a leper who for a solid year has been living in a fool's paradise of make-believe, pretending that I would once more see home, and mother, and you at some time if not soon. Even that some time I would be going back to Jane and that she would not ask where I had been, or why. That together we would begin our life. That's not going to happen, Tom.

Partner B Reflect

One time I took a steam boat that runs from



Battery Park to Coney Island. I thought the going down the bay, the music and gaiety, the amusements at Coney would help me to forget

for a few hours. They only made me remember all the more deeply. I spent the hour on the boat trying to avoid pressing against the crowd my

actions attracted attention and people looked at me suspiciously. I became confused and embarrassed. At last I found myself on the lower deck at the extreme stern of the boat. There I was alone except for a watchman who occasionally strolled past. Evidently he had grown suspicious, too, or some of the passengers had pointed me out. I was not far from jumping overboard then, Tom. The white, foamy wake of the ship a few feet below me looked warm and peaceful. You helped me then, kid, just as you have on other occasions. I remembered what you have asked repeatedly. You wrote once, remember: “Don’t ever just quit.”

Partner B Reflect

Switch Speaker and Listener Roles

That same night when we landed at Coney Island I could do nothing. Every amusement



meant crowding in with a lot of people. I made the attempt several times and each time had to step out of line. A nausea spread through my

whole body. I went back to the boat and when I saw its brilliantly lighted deck, my knees went weak. I couldn't face another agonizing hour on board. I turned back and, keeping in the shadow, crossed to where the lights grew few and although it was miles back to the city, I walked it. Walked and walked through that whole night. I walked, and thought, and suffered. You could never believe how alone aloneness is. You have to move, live, breathe, see, hear, in the midst of millions of people, not daring to touch one of them, afraid to speak lest they become friendly – avoiding – avoiding – eternally avoiding.

Partner A Reflect

I can't endure another day of it. I'm going where there are others like me, where there will be thousands of us, where I need not hesitate to speak to the man I meet in the street. Where, if someone jostles me I don't have to slink away from him like a beaten dog.

Partner A Reflect

Tomorrow I will be gone. Dr. Thompson is helping me get on an army transport from San Francisco that is headed for the Philippines. You can write me at the leper colony on Culion island. I know nothing of the world into which I am going. When I am there, I shall write to you. Meanwhile, don't think I've quit. I've just accepted what can't be avoided – I've lost my life – I shall try to find it again.

Affectionately, Ted

Partner A Reflect

What Empathy Can Do for a Marriage

I conclude the chapter with a positive story of what empathy can do both for the one receiving it and for the relationship.



The most understanding person in my life is my husband. He walked into my life in 2009. Every single day since, I am thankful for him...

I can be a hard person to be with at times. I am complex, and often contradictive. I can be emotional, impatient, and sometimes, though he wouldn't admit it, I'm sure I can be frustrating. Whatever the situation, I can count on his understanding and empathy, 100% of the time.

My relationship with him has changed my life, in that, he has taught me much about self-awareness, spirituality, and kindness. He is always the voice of reason. Most importantly, after many bad experiences with people, he taught me to trust again.

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