

IDEA Empathy Training Suggestions (KM 7.27.09)

Purpose of this training:

- To explore practical, learnable ways to help people connect more deeply with themselves and others
- To transform blame, anger and criticism into understanding, effective communication and the peaceful resolution of conflict.
- To strengthen our ability to inspire compassion and teamwork from others.
- To reframe how we express ourselves and how we hear others.

Stories demonstrating the power of empathy:

1) Empathy to a student from Catherine Cadden

One class, I was teaching a student, a 16 year-old female who was going to her phone, by my account about every 2 minutes, checking and leaning low to listen. I repeated the request to have the cell phones off during our time together. I would get a nod and then, back to the phone. In my frustration I requested that she step into the doorway if she wanted to continue as I was finding hard to concentrate watching her check her phone. (I asked for the doorway because in this school students were not allowed to be in the halls between classes.) She nodded, stayed in seat, and continued the behavior.

This is where self-empathy is vital to keep my own center. I self-connected to my frustration...asked myself honestly did I just want to get my way or was there a need motivating me...and I connected to contribution...this was my last day with these students and I really wanted to give what I came to bring. So, I offered self-expression, "-----,I feel frustrated and sad we are spending all this time about your phone when this is my last day to share with you guys. I'm wanting the phone off so I trust I have your full attention, actually MY full attention to what we are here for. What do you need to have ease and willingness to turn the phone off and your attention to class?" "*!*#! it! Catherine!", she was speaking loud enough for the classes next door to hear, "I'm trying to stop my cousins. Remember, you said, 'If you do what you have always done, you will get what you have always gotten?'...well, I'm tryin' it different. I've got to call it off."

Talking further, I learned she was trying to stop a "take out" of a boy who had pushed her on a bus the day before. The boy wasn't part of her "family". In this neighborhood, "take out" means kill and "family" means gang in the sense of who belongs with what group. I offered to go with her to the "take out" place after school if she wanted support. That touched her and she dropped into her tears. The class and I sat with her. She wanted understanding for her desperation to stop ALL the killings she knows about and her

hopelessness as to what could she really do about it. We gave her understanding simply by listening. Then she and I role-played how she could talk with her cousins about her concerns. The feedback I got was she did get to her cousins at lunch and all "was cool". She let me know that she now felt stronger to speak when she knew of "things goin' down". All in all, the entire time the class and I spent with her, from the time I finally self-expressed instead of 'trying to control the situation', was less than 15 minutes. Then, the rest of the period was regular class. Bonus!

I have found that it is vital to connect honestly with students by first connecting honestly with ourselves. Whenever we are telling ourselves "we have to" or "we should" we begin the power-over paradigm and enter the punitive system because we think there is something "we have to control". The gift of connecting is we find the heart of the matter and can attend to that. The sooner we create connection the sooner life becomes more fun. I love the way Marshal plays with it, "Connection before Education." What student can concentrate on any subject if they are concerned with a murder that is about to happen?

As important as it is to empathize with the student, it is as equally important that a teacher self-empathize and self-express. All needs matter and are vital to the connection. And no one's needs are more important than the other's.

2)

What is Empathy?

Empathy is being fully present to feelings and needs. It is choosing to put our attention on the feelings and needs of another person (empathy) or on our own feelings and needs (self-empathy). It is our presence that conveys empathy most clearly, beginning with an internal choice to be fully present to what is alive in another person and demonstrated through body language, tone of voice, look in the eye, etc. How we convey our choice to focus on another person's feelings and needs may vary from person to person. It is the choosing to be with another person that is constant in empathy.

Empathy can be likened to standing in someone else's shoes, understanding the feelings and needs that make up another person at any given moment. It is putting your attention on the other person's feelings and needs. It can also include putting your attention on your own feelings and needs (self-empathy). Empathy is not agreement, but rather a clear understanding about how things look and feel from another person's perspective. It is the internal focus of attention that happens before we open our mouths that defines empathy.

Empathy is a word for seeing the world through another person's eyes. That means understanding another person's point of view, and understanding another side of the story. It doesn't mean we agree with what others are saying, but we are willing to understand how things look from a point of view different than our own. We can also empathize with ourselves and look at what we are feeling and needing. We call that self-empathy.

Examples of Empathy and Self-Empathy

Situation: Sat. night, a father and his 16 yr. old daughter agreed the daughter could go to the movies with some friends and that she would be home by 11 PM. It is 12:30 AM Sun. morning and the daughter is just walking in the house.

Father's silent self-empathy to himself: (Listening to his thoughts without editing) Who does she think she is coming home at this time of the night? Does she think this is fun for me, staying up waiting for her? Doesn't she bother to think that I might have a life, too? She's so selfish. I could ground her for a month, no, maybe a year. (Noticing the feelings behind the thoughts) Whew, I'm shaking here, must be a layer of anger I'm dealing with. Yes, anger and fear. I was so worried not knowing where she was. Now I have this sense of relief and outrage at the same time. (Connecting with the needs under the feelings) Behind the fear and panic I realize I was desperate to know if she was safe. Not knowing if my child was safe had me going crazy. Now that I know she's safe, what could this outrage be about? Why not just relief? I guess I value personal responsibility and awareness of how one's actions might impact others. I'd like some empathy for how painful that was for me to wonder if she was OK. That feels clearer now, but there's still something left. I guess that other part that was nearly as painful as not knowing if she was safe, was the thought that I couldn't trust her to do what she agreed to. Trust and integrity are two of my highest values and I especially want to have that in my relationship with my daughter. (Request to self) I want to make a connection with her that will help us work through this in a way where we reestablish trust. I guess my request to myself is to try to give her empathy for what's going on in her right now before asking her to hear my honesty.

Father's empathy for his daughter: (guessing her feelings and needs) I'm wondering if you're a bit worried now about how I'm going to react to you coming home at 12:30 AM...is some of that going on for you now? I'm guessing you were having a good time with your friends and you'd really like to trust that friendships are valued in this house, yes? I'm noticing a curiosity within myself when I think about the times I came home late when I was your age and I want to check it out—was it awkward for you to tell your friends that you were expected home at 11 PM when it seemed like everyone else was not concerned about when they were getting home? Were you torn about wanting to have fun with your friends and fit in, and on the other hand, keeping your word with me? (Transition questions to see if empathy is complete and the other person is ready for

honesty) Is there anything else going on for you that you'd like me to know? Are you willing to hear what's going on in me right now?

What are common obstacles to Empathy?

The following excerpt is from "Empathic Listening," an article by H. Holley Humphrey:

10 Obstacles To Empathic Listening.

The ten most common ways to take the spotlight away from the speaker are when we:

1. Give advice /Fix-it

"I think you should ..."

"If I were you, I'd ..."

"There's a wonderful book"

2. Explain it away

"I would have called but ..."

"She only said that 'cuz you..."

"But I didn't mean to"

3. Correct it

"That's not how it happened."

"You're the one who started.."

"Excuse me? I never said that!"

4. Console

"It wasn't your fault..."

"You did the best you could...."

"It could've been a lot worse."

5. Tell a story

"That reminds me of the time..."

"I know just how you feel.

Yesterday, I was walking ..."

6. Shut down feelings

"Cheer up. Don't be so mad"

"Blah blah. Quit belly-aching."

7. Sympathize/commiserate

"Oh you poor thing.."

“How can people do that?”

8. Investigate/interrogate

“What made you do that?”

“When did this happen?”

“Why didn’t you call ?”

9. Evaluate/Educate

“You’re just too unrealistic.”

“The trouble with them is...”

“What is this telling you?”

“If you weren’t so defensive...”

10. One-Up

“That’s nothing. Listen to this!”

Timing is Everything!

These temptations are actually “premature” attempts to connect because they usually come with nurturing intentions. They’re not “wrong” but the timing is poor if the speaker is still uncovering her deeper need. Listen for responses that indicate completion, such as, “Exactly!” or “That’s right!”

Use your intuition about timing or ask if the speaker is ready to listen:

- *“Do you have a sense that I’ve really heard you or is there something else you’d like me to understand?”*
- *“I’m moved by what you’ve said. Would you like to hear my feelings about that?”*
- *“I’m curious about this. May I ask a couple of questions?”*
- *“I have a suggestion. Would you like to hear it now or would you prefer to continue?”*
- *“I have a story that’s similar and might be useful. Would you enjoy hearing it?”*
- *“I’m remembering it a little differently. Would you be willing to hear my version?”*
- *“Given the situation, would you like to brainstorm some solutions together?”*

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The following was written by Mark Schultz, co-founder of NVC Academy (www.nvctraining.com):

Empathy is not Sympathy

Sympathy entails a quality of support that requires a degree of agreement with the other person's views. Empathy means we fully let in what the other expresses, without agreeing or disagreeing with the content of the expression. Empathy implies seeking to understand, not seeking agreement or disagreement.

Empathy is not “Niceness”

If by being nice, we mean polite "proper" behavior, empathy can often be the antithesis of "niceness". Empathy calls for our authenticity, that we acknowledge what is often kept hidden by the polite, nice world, bringing those uncomfortable issues to the forefront.

Empathy is not Passivity

Being empathetic does not mean I become a limp noodle without my own needs and expression, or indifferent to conflict. Empathy is an active process of presence, listening, observing and internally opening to someone other than our selves.

Empathy is not the same as Love

If love is the giving from our hearts without expectation, empathy is a quality of being fully present to another person, focusing on the other, which often opens our hearts to such giving. In fact, empathy moves us to the center of conflict. Human beings disagree, misunderstand, react and so forth. Our world is full of examples of this. Empathy works directly with this noble truth. By deeply understanding another, we can reduce misunderstanding, see clearly how our views differ, and build trust through the truly courageous act of letting another human being fully into our awareness and maybe even our hearts. It doesn't mean we agree or disagree, sympathize, lie down, or be polite; we simply give another the gift of our presence and understanding.

Empathy is not Naive

Empathy is exactly the opposite of naiveté, empathy ends naiveté. How? Because when we fully receive another person, seek to understand, the maximum amount of information is brought into the open. It means we are now aware of another's needs giving us the maximum opportunity to act on accurate information at the deepest level of trust, opening to the greatest possibility of resolution. What we have done is relieve ourselves of the naive idea that some problems are unsolvable, that violent disagreement is absolutely inevitable.

Practicing empathy:

- 1) Make sure your intention is to connect
- 2) Put your focus on feelings and needs (your own for self empathy) (other's feelings and needs for empathy for someone else)
- 3) Approach empathy with a sense of curiosity. We can only guess at someone else's feelings and needs. Each person is the authority on his/her needs.
- 4) Check it out if possible—did you guess correctly? Did the other person think you really got what they were saying?
- 5) Give empathy for joy and pain
- 6) Exercises:
 - a. While watching TV, guess what a speaker/character might be feeling and needing/valuing.
 - b. While listening to the radio, guess what the speaker is feeling and needing/valuing.
 - c. Translate bumper stickers into the feelings and needs/values they portray.
 - d. Try the Need Cards Empathy game under “Resources” on this website.
 - e. Next time you are talking to someone, make a guess at how they are feeling and what's important to them (the needs/values) in the moment and check it out with them.

Resources:

Holley Humphrey's “Empathic Listening” article
NVC Academy's free empathy telecourses (www.nvctraining.com)
Nonviolent Communication- Marshall Rosenberg (book)