



Empathy builds connections

Harper Lee wrote, “You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it,” in *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

Empathy is having the ability to sense what someone else is feeling or thinking. But it goes beyond just putting yourself in someone else’s shoes. As Harper Lee suggests, you have to “climb inside and walk around,” for empathy is about being able to *share* in someone else’s perspective. Empathy allows you to “feel *with* people,” according to Dr. Rene Brown. It facilitates connection. Connection is important because human beings are wired for it . Meaningful social connection enhances overall health and well-being. It can even help strengthen the immune system, help with disease recovery, and influence longevity. Empathy is important because it helps us understand how someone is feeling so that we can properly respond to their feelings and emotions.

To truly have empathy and share in someone else’s perspective, you must have some degree of knowledge of who someone is and what they are doing or trying to do. You must also connect with something in yourself that knows the feeling or a similar feeling. Without a sense of understanding, you may just have sympathy. Sympathy is when you care about the feelings of another person but you may not understand them. Empathy is not necessarily about fixing things — it’s about understanding and connecting. In some instances, you may be able to say, “I’ve been in a similar situation. It really stinks and it hurts. You’re not alone.” And other times, there may not be words. It is simply the connection to the empathy that makes it better. “I don’t know what to say, but I’m glad you told me.”

Empathy is hard work, and it requires being vulnerable. Nursing scholar, Dr. Teresa Wiseman identified four attributes of empathy:

1. **Taking on someone else’s perspective.** When you share or take on the perspective of another person, you must also be able to recognize someone else’s perspective as truth.
2. **Being nonjudgmental.** When we judge another person’s situation, we discount their experience. Therefore, to take on the perspective of another person, you must put away your own thoughts, assumptions, and biases.
3. **Recognizing someone else’s emotion or understanding their feelings.** Recognizing and understanding someone else’s emotions requires you to be in touch with your own feelings and to put yourself aside so that you can focus on the person in distress.
4. **Communicating your understanding of a person’s feelings.** It is important to not only express your understanding of someone’s emotions or feelings, but to also validate them. Validating someone’s feelings demonstrates that you accept, acknowledge, and understand them.

Empathy is a skill that you can teach and learn across your life span. To help build empathy with children, parents can:

- Model emotions, feelings, and ways to show compassion.
- Read, talk about, or analyze stories, including those that embrace diversity and differences.
- Talk about feelings and what you can do to help someone feel better.
- Consider other people's perspectives, and talk about differences and biases (race, gender, identity, religion, income levels, etc.).
- Fight stereotypes. (Pink is not just for girls.)
- Name the emotions, and give words to feelings.
- Role play.

Parents can help reinforce empathy with teenagers by:

- Teaching HEAR (**H**alt — give your full attention to a speaker. **E**ngage with the speaker by listening and learning. **A**nticipate what you will learn. **R**eplay, communicate, and validate your understanding.)
- Watching a movie or show together.
- Encouraging your teen to be in touch with his/her own feelings.
- Teach your teen not to criticize or judge until they have "climb(ed) inside...and walk(ed) around in" someone else's skin
- Model how to articulate feelings by expressing how the actions of others make you feel ("When my boss said or did ..., I felt ...")
- Acknowledge empathy in your teen when you see it.

Adults can build empathy by:

- **Embracing curiosity and talking to strangers.** Talking to new people or experiencing new things helps you learn about what someone else's life is actually like.
- **Keeping up with current events.** Current events help you move beyond people who look and think like you.
- **Volunteering.** Working together on a shared cause helps put aside differences and grows respect.
- **Walking in someone else's shoes (literally).** Attend a church service other than your own, visit another country, or participate in an age or disability simulation.
- **Practicing listening skills.** When present, you put yourself aside and can better understand a person's unique experience in that very moment.
- **Keeping biases and privileges in check.** Try to be honest with yourself and learn about your biases, which are often unconscious. Also, remember that privilege might be something that you didn't earn or something that you don't even realize you benefit from.
- **Reading.** Reading books and watching shows can help you to open your mind to the experiences of others, including increasing your capacity to better understand a character's thoughts and feelings — even someone who is not like you. Choose authors with diverse backgrounds or stories whose characters have lives and backgrounds different from yours.

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