



Chapter 8

EMPATHY

8.1 – What is Empathy?



Hey, it's Tom again. Grab your phone. For real. I want to show you this three-minute video on **Empathy Vs. Sympathy** from one of my favorite researchers, Dr. Brené Brown. Here it is: <https://youtu.be/1Evwgu369Jw>.¹ You can also use your camera to scan the code on the right. The video starts with a commercial, so make sure to hit the SKIP button. I'll see you back here in three minutes. Ready... go.



Great video, right? **“Empathy is feeling *with* people.”** explains Dr. Brené Brown. That's exactly what the bear does for the fox. The bear displays the four qualities of empathy described earlier in the video. Look at the four qualities below, and ask yourself where each one is displayed in the video.

1. Perspective taking. We have to mentally put ourselves in the other person's shoes and try to see the problem from their point of view. That means “pressing pause” in our minds so we can be fully present and understand where they're coming from. **Questions for you:** At what point (or points) did the bear try to understand the perspective of the fox? When can perspective taking be difficult?

2. Staying out of Judgement. It's not our place to judge anyone (you already know that), but I don't think that's their main point. The main idea is about our tendency to either give advice or paint a “silver lining” around someone's pain. We want to help our friend – and that's a good thing – but if they're not asking for advice, we should NOT automatically jump in and try to solve the problem for them. Empathy includes acknowledging that we don't have all the answers. When we say things like “Here's what you should do...” we're actually making a judgement statement. When we say, “At least it's not as bad as...” we're actually

minimizing their pain. **Questions for you:** Which character in the video was passing judgement and minimizing the fox’s pain? What did the bear do (or NOT DO) to stay out of judgement?

3. Recognizing emotion in other people. This is the primary skill of empathy. If you watch closely, you can see the bear picking up on the fox’s emotions all through the video, from start to finish. I counted at least five times, and maybe you can find more! **Questions for you:** How many times can you see the bear recognizing the fox’s emotions? How would you describe the bear’s attitude or demeanor as he hears about the fox’s struggle?

4. Communicating their emotion back to them. The bear climbs down in the hole and says to the fox, “I know what it’s like down here... and you’re not alone.” Notice how the bear does not go into a long story about all the past pain of the bear’s life? That’s important. To show empathy, we have to “go there” emotionally and show that we understand the other person’s feelings, BUT... without making it all about us. **Questions for you:** Why do humans sometimes struggle with making it all about us? How can you communicate that you understand someone’s emotions without saying you know **exactly** how they feel?

I like how Dr. Brown explains that people don’t always want a solution:

If I share something with you that’s very difficult, I’d rather you say, **“Phew... I don’t even know what to say right now... I’m just glad you told me.”** Because the truth is: rarely can a response make something better. What makes something better is connection. – Dr. Brené Brown

When you show empathy, and when the other person opens up, it creates a deep personal connection between you. You’re building trust. Think about how vulnerable the other person must feel to share their deepest feelings with you.

When a friend shares something deep with me, I automatically consider it confidential. I will never gossip or use that information against them. Trust is the foundation of all relationships.

But let me be clear. There are some situations where I am required to share information, especially if someone is in danger. Remember how I talked about mandatory reporting in chapter three? I hope you’ll take on the same responsibility and get help for a friend if they’ve been abused or if someone is in danger. Even if the other person begs you not to tell, you still need to do the right thing. Offer to go with your friend to talk with a trusted adult or a counselor. After all, isn’t **going there with them** what empathy is all about?



8.2 – The Science of Empathy



Hey y'all! It's your friendly neighborhood Dr. OH here to walk you through a little bit of the science of empathy, especially as it applies to your teenage years. Remember when we talked about Emotional Intelligence and how it relates to your brain in adolescence? We talked about the limbic system (where emotions happen in your brain) and the prefrontal cortex (where reasoning and decision-making happen). We discussed the fact that your prefrontal cortex is still developing, therefore your Emotional Intelligence is still developing.

So, where is empathy in this network between you're the emotional center and the reasoning center of the brain?

Originally, scientists proposed that the way our brain reacts when we experience emotions or pain is the same way it reacts when we see someone else experience emotions or pain. You see someone cry on TV and your brain mirrors what their brain is doing, so you get a little sad (or in my case, cry with them).

Turns out, this theory about brain activation during empathy is only partially true. To study the topic, scientists typically use the brain's pain pathways because we understand those pathways very well. This is the general research question: *does the brain look the same when you experience pain directly versus when you see someone else experience pain?* This is the general research answer: *yes and no*. In a review on the neuroscience of empathy, the authors use this example:

“Watching a needle puncture someone else's skin can be distressing, but it's not the same feeling as getting pricked yourself.”²

Why does the brain behave this way? Because you understand that you exist separately from other people. Your brain doesn't stop taking that into account when you see other people experiencing emotions or pain. So, there is *some* overlap in activation – that's your brain saying, “*I know how that feels*”. There are also areas of the brain that activate only when you experience an emotion **directly**, and areas that activate only when you experience it **vicariously** (meaning through other people).

Because these brain regions are still going through so much change and development in your teenage years, your ability to be empathetic develops quite a bit during adolescence. In a longitudinal (meaning long-term) study on empathy, researchers tested a group of teenagers once a year for five years in a row, from

age 12 to age 16. They found that empathy generally increased over the course of those five years.³ They also found that the amount of increase varied significantly between individuals, and that girls generally had higher levels of empathy than boys. When the same teenagers turned 35 years old (like I said, it was a long study), they were tested again. This time, researchers found that the development of empathy during adolescence predicted how socially competent each individual was as an adult.

What does that mean? It means empathy is a key factor in all aspects of your social life. Do you want to relate to other people and be less awkward in social situations? You'll need empathy for that!

In another longitudinal study, 467 teens took a test to measure their empathy once a year starting at 13 years old.⁴ This time, researchers found that adolescents typically displayed 1 of 3 levels of empathy: low, medium, or high. Those with low levels of empathy, showed a *decrease* in empathy skills as they got older. Those with medium or high levels of empathy showed *increases* in empathy skills. This result reveals that not every adolescent is on the same developmental path – an important reminder that we are all different and our paths are not predetermined.

There has also been a line of research focused on where our level of empathy comes from in the first place. How did the teens with low, medium, or high empathy levels get to those levels? Turns out, there seem to be quite a few connections between the way that we are parented when we are young and how our empathy, conscience, and moral values develop. When parents help their kids with reasoning about their decisions, they are more likely to have a better grasp of other peoples' perspectives when they get older. For example, "Lina is crying. Why do you think she's crying? You took her toy, and it's not nice to take someone's toy without asking." Those kinds of thought processes help a child develop empathy.⁵

For a discussion of more research on moral development, which includes empathy, have a look at the research by Dr. Nancy Eisenberg.⁶ You can do a basic web search for "Dr. Nancy Eisenberg - Emotion, Regulation, and Moral Development" or if you're using an e-reader you can click on the link in the references at the end of this chapter. You can also look at any of the articles in this section for more information. Those articles all have reference sections too, which can open up a whole world of information you never knew you needed to know. Have fun doing your research, and most importantly, have fun developing your empathy skills!

8.2. Discussion Questions

1. What are some specific ways the skill of empathy can help you out in social situations?
2. Research has shown that women generally have higher levels of empathy than men. This does not mean all women have more than all men, but when you look at the averages, women score higher. Why do you think that is true?
3. Do you think you're a high, medium, or low empathy person? Why?
4. What are some ways we can try build our empathy skills?



8.3 – How to Increase Your Empathy Skills



Hi, its Dr. Kagan again. So now that you **totally** understand what empathy is, all you have to do is now be more empathetic and understanding! How difficult is that? If you catch my sarcasm here... it's really not that easy. It's hard to know what it feels like to "*walk a mile in someone else's shoes.*"⁷ Tom and Dr.

Hooge already discussed what empathy is and how it works in your brain. Now I want to give you some practical tips for developing your empathy skills. For me, empathy is the very essence of or central to being human. But even I, a psychologist who is always supposed to be empathetic, have lapses of empathy.

Let me share a quick story with you. I was seeing four 8th grade students together in a weekly group counseling session at a middle school where I used to work. The purpose of the group was to help the students adjust to school and feel better about themselves. I led them through all kinds of activities that involved sharing feelings and building trust, so the group of boys would become more comfortable talking with me and with each other. I wanted them to feel free open enough to share about their positive and negative experiences in school.

Weeks went by and no matter what I tried I could sense and feel that the students were reluctant to talk about things. They usually said everything was fine or there were no issues to discuss. One student even suggested there was no need to meet weekly. I wasn't convinced there was nothing to talk about, so finally I asked what was wrong. I appealed to them to be open and honest, assuring them we would keep our conversations confidential.

What finally got expressed was the boys didn't feel comfortable with me. They felt that I wouldn't understand their issues. They shared that they were Black and

Latino, and I was White. And due to our different races and cultures, I never would be able to understand their experiences in school and in the community, and I wouldn't be able to empathize with their challenges and difficulties.

I had to do some deep, personal reflecting on how these young men perceived me. I also had to look at my own feelings about them not trusting me. I did feel hurt. I felt like a failure. You see, I needed to own this. In this moment, I failed to be empathetic. I had to work through that.

Most importantly, I needed to understand their experiences and perspectives and genuinely show that I understood them, so they could relate to me. Once the boys were able to voice their feelings and views, and I once I listened with empathy (taking care time to understanding their issues and perspectives), then our hearts and minds met, and we started working together to support their emotional needs.

This experience reminds me of a quote from our 26th president, Theodore Roosevelt. He said, **“No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”**⁸ That's the key: once the boys knew how much I cared about them, then they were able to open up and be real with me. So, let me share what I learned from this important experience by giving you the five insights below:

5 Tips for Developing Empathy

1. **Listen with your full attention.** Empathy is about understanding each other's perspective. The only way to understand each other's perspective is to listen. Sometimes the best thing I can do is to listen and shut up.
2. **Don't judge.** Try to be less judgmental, and honor other people's opinions (even if you disagree with them). Nothing shuts people down quicker than the feeling of being judged.
3. **Be aware of your own feelings.** When you're aware of your own emotions, it gives you a clearer perspective, and it helps you remain open to the thoughts and feelings of others.
4. **Don't be defensive.** You don't always have to defend yourself, argue your point and be right. That's much too much stress, and it makes it hard to be empathetic.
5. **Practice makes... progress!** Try and practice empathy. It's amazing! It feels wonderful when you say, “I hear you” and you know the other person really believes you. Or how terrific it is when you know a family member or friend “has your back”. They have empathy for you. When you show empathy, it shows you care. As humans, empathy is the key skill that brings us together. It gives you a sense of connection, and it is incredibly rewarding.

Empathy is something we always have to work on, and no one is perfect at it. We can be understanding in some situations and not in others. You may have to take some time to process what they're really saying and communicating, so you can better understand their feelings. As you develop that sense of awareness, you will be able to show your empathetic self!

8.3. Discussion Questions

1. Think about someone who showed empathy or was empathetic to you. Do you remember the situation or circumstances? How did it feel? What did they do that connected with you?
2. Can you think of a situation or circumstances where you were empathetic? How did you show your empathy?
3. Take a look at the boat metaphor from the beginning of the book. How can the skill of empathy fit in with the metaphor? (Remember: all metaphors eventually break down if we push the meaning too far.)
4. What could our school community do to emphasize more empathy?
5. What is one specific aspect of empathy you want to work on in your life?

Chapter 8 References

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- ⁵ Zahn-Waxler, C., Radke-Yarrow, M., & King, R. A. (1979). Child Rearing and Children's Prosocial Initiations Toward Victims of Distress. *Child Development*, 319-330.
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- ⁷ Walking a Mile In Their Shoes- Great Quotes on Empathy, Mind Fuel Daily, August 2020, <https://www.mindfueldaily.com/livewell/walking-a-mile-in-their-shoes-great-quotes-on-empathy/>.
- ⁸ "Quote of the Day", Good News Network, April 2020, <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/theodore-roosevelt-quote-about-reputation/>