

Empathy 101: What It Is & What It Isn't

What Empathy Is

What Is Empathy Really? Empathy is the skill of understanding another person's inner world—how they feel, what they fear, what they hope—and responding in a way that makes them feel seen rather than judged. It is not agreement. It is not fixing. It is not absorbing someone's emotions.

Empathy is simply saying: "I'm trying to understand what this feels like for you."

What Empathy Is: • Seeing the emotion underneath the reaction • Listening without preparing a defense • Acknowledging someone's experience as valid • Staying curious instead of assuming • Responding with warmth, clarity, and care

What Empathy Is Not: • Fixing someone's problem for them • Agreeing with everything they say • Taking responsibility for their feelings • Minimizing ("It's not that bad") • Shifting attention back to yourself

Why Empathy Matters: Empathy reduces conflict, softens defenses, builds trust, and helps people feel emotionally safe enough to be honest. It transforms conversations from "me versus you" into "us trying to understand each other."

Simple Practice: When someone shares something difficult, try responding with: "Given what you're feeling, that makes sense. I want to understand—can you tell me more about what this is like for you?" Empathy begins with curiosity.

Empathy vs Fixing vs Pity vs Enabling

Empathy = staying curious about someone's experience and reflecting back what you hear. You listen more than you speak and let their feelings be valid, even if you would respond differently.

Fixing = jumping in with advice, solutions, or "here's what you should do" before the person has felt heard. Fixing can come from care, but when it is too fast it often leaves people feeling alone or judged.

Pity = looking down on someone or treating them as fragile or broken. It often sounds like "poor you" and creates distance instead of connection.

Enabling = rescuing someone from all consequences or discomfort so they never have to face reality or grow. It can feel kind in the moment, but it keeps unhelpful patterns going for both people.

Healthy empathy can sit beside boundaries. You can care deeply about how someone feels and still say no, offer honest feedback, or step back when you need to.

Empathy Phrases

Try these simple empathy phrases:

- "That sounds really hard. I'm really glad you told me."
- "It makes sense that you feel this way after everything that has happened."
- "I'm here with you. Do you want to tell me more, or just sit quietly together for a minute?"

Non-Empathy Phrases (to Use With Care)

These phrases often shut people down instead of helping them feel understood:

- "At least it's not as bad as..."
- "You shouldn't feel that way. Just be positive."
- "Here's what you need to do..." (said before you have really listened).

Instead of trying to say the perfect thing, focus on being present, listening, and reflecting back what you hear.

5 Scripts for Hard Conversations

1. When you know you hurt someone

"Thank you for telling me this. I can hear how much it hurt you. It makes sense that you feel this way. I am sorry for my part in that, and I want to understand more so I do not repeat it."

2. When you need to set a boundary

"I care about you and I want to keep talking about this. Right now my system is getting overwhelmed. I need to take a break and come back to this later so I can respond instead of react."

3. When you disagree about what happened

"We remember this differently, and that is hard. It still makes sense to me that you feel hurt. I want to understand your experience better, even if we see some of the details differently."

4. When someone is shutting down

"I notice you are getting quiet, and I do not want to push you. I care about you, and I am here when you are ready. Would it help if we just sat together for a minute, or would you rather have some space?"

5. When someone is overwhelmed or panicking

"This feels like a lot right now, and that makes sense. I am here with you. Let us take this one small step at a time. Do you want to try a few slow breaths with me, or should we just sit quietly while this wave passes?"

What Empathy Sounds Like (1-Page Reference)

Empathy is less about having the perfect response and more about staying present and curious. Here are simple sentence starters you can use:

Staying with their feelings

- "That sounds really hard."
- "It makes sense that you feel..."
- "Given everything you have been through, I get why this hits so strongly."

Showing you care

- "I am really glad you told me."
- "Thank you for trusting me with this."
- "You do not have to go through this alone."

Owning impact without debating details

- "I can hear that my actions impacted you, and that matters to me."
- "I understand that you felt ignored, and I am sorry that was your experience."

- "I see now how that came across. I want to do better."

Perspective-Shifting Questions

Use these questions silently in your own mind—or out loud, if the moment is right—to soften defensiveness and move toward understanding:

- "Given what they have been through, what might this situation feel like for them?"
- "If I assume their reaction makes sense in their story, how does that change how I see this?"
- "What might they be afraid of losing or not getting right now?"
- "If I were in their position, with their stress and history, how might I feel?"
- "What do they seem to be needing most: to be heard, reassured, respected, or given space?"
- "What is one curious question I could ask instead of jumping in with my opinion?"

You do not have to agree with someone to practice perspective-taking. You are simply allowing their feelings to make sense in context, which reduces shame and defensiveness for both of you.