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Empathy vs. Sympathy: Are My Attempts Really Helping Others?
by Matthew Saxey

The terms sympathy and empathy are sometimes used interchangeably. However, Brené Brown maintains that sympathy and empathy are different, asserting that sympathy often fuels disconnection while empathy can create greater connection.1 Unfortunately, even those with the best intentions can shortchange others if they are not sensitive to the difference between sympathy and empathy.

When you have a friend in trouble, what can you do to respond in a way that will build your bond rather than weaken it?

What Is Sympathy?

Sympathy is an attempt to appreciate the fact that another is in trouble. In an attempt to respond and console, offering words of sympathy is usually the first thing that comes to mind. Consider the following conversation:

While Rebecca is taking out the trash, she notices her neighbor, John, attempting to get his five kids into the car. Seeing that John is frustrated, Rebecca seeks to validate John by saying, “Wow, that must be tough getting five kids in the car!” John responds, “Oh, it is!” Rebecca smiles and walks back into her home.

Sympathy, as often is the case, consists generally of offering pity to help someone feel better—or even as an attempt to show some sort of appreciation of their difficult situation. Did Rebecca’s sympathetic offering of pity help validate John or lighten his load? Maybe yes. But perhaps not.

For example, he might have thought she was making a derogatory comment about the number of children he has or his ineffectiveness as a father.

This situation might have moved past words and been more empathetic if she had not only sympathized but also offered understanding and help.

If Rebecca had a moment to spare, for example, she could have put the trash down briefly, said hello to the children, and offered to help: “John, would you like a hand?” or “Could Robert and I help you with Jimmy—seems like he is in meltdown mode. Is everything alright?” Asking empathetic questions like these might help her find out that John’s wife is on a work trip, one of his children is ill, he just lost his job, or any other of a myriad of problems that might be currently plaguing John.

Without taking the time to show empathy and ask, we might never know what others are going through—and may be unable to help because we simply do not know of their heartache, devastation, or trial.

Why Add Empathy?

Feeling for someone is one way to be sensitive, but empathetic actions not only seek to understand what someone is going through but they also seek to understand what might help. Consider the difference between sympathy and empathy in the following scenario:

Mark, who is married to Kelly, has noticed that Kelly has been a little off over the past few days. Kelly’s feeling down makes sense to Mark because Kelly’s grandmother died last week. In an attempt to console Kelly, Mark says, “I’m sorry you’re feeling down about your grandmother, Kelly.” Kelly thanks him, accepts his hug, and the day goes on—she appreciated his sympathy.

However, what might have happened if Mark approached Kelly and said something like, “Kelly, it looks like you’ve been feeling down the past couple of days. I know your grandma’s passing has been difficult for you, but is there anything else going on?” Until that point, Kelly knew she wasn’t feeling great, but after some introspection, Kelly shared with her husband that it was more than the death.
She realized that her grandmother’s passing had helped her stop to consider that perhaps she had not appreciated her family members enough, and she was becoming concerned about her grandfather’s future. Identifying the underlying issues from this empathetic conversation helped better inform Mark and Kelly about how to address Kelly’s real concerns. In the process, she realized how grateful she had been for Mark’s caring and empathetic response to her grief.

While the change in Mark’s actions might be simple, the difference came when he sought to take Kelly’s perspective instead of assuming he knew what might be bothering her. When seeking to listen and understand another, the empathetic individual recognizes the importance of not assuming they fully comprehend another’s situation—they might even say something like, “I have no idea what that must be like for you.”

When empathy, in contrast to sympathy, is used with family members, loved ones, friends, acquaintances, and others, recipients of empathy often feel validated and more connected to the empathetic person.

**Ways to Show Empathy**

As in the examples, empathy can be implemented and practiced by being mindful of the ways you interact with others in conversation. Here are four ways you can start practicing empathy today:

**Avoid “At Least” Statements**

Although there is an array of research endorsing individual positivity, imposing a happy perspective on others does not appear to promote similar positive outcomes. Is it wrong to help someone to look on the bright side? Of course not. However, waiting for the other person to change to a more positive tone before you make a “bright side” suggestion and avoiding the use of “at least” can lead to greater empathy. Brené Brown notes that an empathetic response rarely starts with “at least.”

Consider this example: “Sarah, I just found out my son Michael isn’t going to graduate from high school this year,” said Liz dejectedly. Sarah sympathizes: “At least your daughter is an A student!” Understandably, this remark does not help Liz feel any better about Michael and just reminds her of the differences between her more academically inclined daughter and her son, Michael. This kind of comment leads to a growing disconnection between them as friends rather than increasing their connection as confidantes.

**Validate Others**

Validating someone when they trust you with a difficulty can lead to closer relationships. In other words, helping someone feel that what they said is important can help them feel comfortable discussing important things with you in the future.

What does validation look like? Two examples might sound like, “I don’t even know what to say—I’m so glad you told me,” or “This must be hard to talk about, thanks for opening up to me.” These responses can help someone feel that they are not alone in their difficulties. Sometimes all the person needs is to feel that they are heard and that they are not alone.

At times, learning about another’s serious concerns can leave us completely speechless. In these emotionally heavy situations, we can say something as simple as, “You matter [to me].” Genuine phrases can help, at least a little, in rough situations. As validating phrases are used, lasting connections can be fostered.

**Nobody Wants to Get “Should” On**

Another well-intentioned phrase that can paradoxically be problematic is saying, “You should . . .” when someone shares a problem. When advice is solicited, the asker may genuinely appreciate a sage piece of sensitive advice. However, when your “you should” statement is unsolicited,
it can lead to disconnection. Chances are that your advice may not even be the best course of action in their situation or may seem to them to oversimplify or trivialize the complicated situation they face.

Tony Overbay, licensed marriage and family therapist, states that “nobody wants to get should on.” In his individual and couples therapy practice, Tony finds that offering unsolicited advice in the form of telling a partner or friend what they “should” do in order to quickly and easily solve their problem can lead recipients to feel invalidated or inadequate.

Opening Up the Conversation

Most—if not all—people have devastating, heartbreaking points in life. When those hard times arise, most just want someone to listen and understand where they are coming from. In seeking to give an empathic response, consider opening up the conversation. This can include asking clarifying questions like: “So what I hear you saying is ______; did I get that right? What did I miss?” or “What is that like for you?” “Tell me more about ______,” or “Help me understand what you mean by ______.”

Even when a person decides to confide their difficult experiences, the natural tendency can be to think about how you might respond while they are speaking or even jump in too soon and interrupt them. Though simple in principle, it can be hard in practice to remember that what the person fundamentally wants is for someone to listen.

At what might seem like the end of the conversation, perhaps ask something like, “Is there anything else you want to share?” There might be much more someone wants to say—especially in heartbreaking situations when you have proven yourself to be a trusted friend or partner.

In the End

Although empathy can yield remarkable benefits, showing empathy can be difficult in practice. We must overcome our natural responses to sympathize—and choose to make better, more informed responses to those around us through empathy. Fortunately, empathy is a choice that we can choose every day. While there is not an exact script for showing empathy for all the situations we may encounter, we can make our best efforts to fuel connection with family, loved ones, friends, co-workers, and others by utilizing these empathic practices and principles.

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Endnotes

1 Brown, B. (2013, December 10). Brené Brown on empathy. [video file]. RSA.
4 Click, L. (2017, November 1). 31 Empathetic statements for when you don’t know what to say. Medium.