

Empathy vs Sympathy



When people come to us to talk through their challenges or problems, how do we know what the *right* thing to say is? In trying to make things better, we typically respond in one of two ways; with sympathy or with empathy. Confusing these two concepts is common, but according to Dr Brené Brown, they are quite distinct and have very different effects on the other person.



SYMPATHY

I **see** what you're going through



VS

EMPATHY

I **feel** what you're going through



The sympathetic response is about offering a silver lining, and not authentic support or understanding. It doesn't solve the problem and attempts to minimise it, leading to feelings of isolation.

Sympathy sounds like:

- "Look on the bright side."
- "It's not that bad."
- "At least you have this going for you."

Empathy is about getting 'down in the hole' with the other person. You don't necessarily have to have experienced the same situation they're going through, but you do need to acknowledge what they're feeling and hear what they're saying. This promotes feelings of inclusion.

Empathy sounds like:

- "I'm here to listen to you."
- "I don't know what you're going through exactly but I know what that emotion feels like."
- "I don't know what to say, but I'm really glad you told me."

WHY BE EMPATHETIC?

- Forges trust between you and the other person
- Builds a stronger relationship that is mutually supportive
- Helps you resolve conflicts, as you can engage in 'perspective taking'
- Creates an inclusive, safe space where people can be their 'whole selves'

"Empathy fuels connection, sympathy drives disconnection."
– Brené Brown

THE FOUR QUALITIES OF EMPATHY



Empathy operates on four qualities:

- 1 Perspective-taking.** Imagining what it would be like to be in someone else's shoes and taking the time to be present with them.
- 2 Avoiding judgement.** Simply listening instead of offering solutions, silver-linings or your own opinions.
- 3 Recognising emotion.** Identifying emotions in others that you may have felt before and connecting with these emotions.
- 4 Communicating emotion.** Sharing that you recognise and understand the emotions another person is experiencing.

Practising these four qualities in your day-to-day interactions will help you build up your 'empathy muscle' so that it becomes easier over time.

REFLECTION

What can you say to be more empathetic with others? Think about what each of the Four Tenets of Empathy might sound like and brainstorm a range of phrases you can use in conversation. Avoid the sympathy traps like 'At least...' or 'It's not that bad'.