

EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION

Listening and Speaking

It is critical to focus your attention not only on what you say, but also on how you listen. I believe it is important to FIRST focus on listening – to others and to oneself. Communication is a two-street – listening and speaking. We usually focus our energy and attention on how others speak and not on how we listen. We have a choice as to how we hear others' words. Choosing to hear their words differently, impacts how we speak. Both the listener and the speaker hold responsibility what is being spoken **and** what is being heard.

“Knowledge Speaks, Wisdom Listens” ~ Anonymous

A. COMPASSIONATE LISTENING

When we choose to listen with an open, compassionate heart, we are able to hear the meaning underneath the words being spoken. Changing how we listen to others and yourself can have a profound impact on how we speak. Empathy is one way to listen to others. Listening empathically means to listen with compassion and to hear without judgment. We can listen with compassion through our quality of presence, our intentions and our words. Empathy is a way to understand what is really important to the other person or yourself. An empathic response helps one feel validated and gain self-insight.

By empathically listening and verbally translating one's stories, judgments, criticisms and blame into an expression of needs, we open the possibility for connection, understanding, and collaboration.

On Listening

“I do not know if you have ever examined how you listen, it doesn't matter to what, whether to a bird, to the wind . . . to the rushing waters . . . in a dialogue with yourself . . . If we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our background, our inclination, our impulses; when we dominate we hardly listen to what is being said . . . One listens and therefore learns, only in a state of attention, a state of silence, in which the whole background is in abeyance, is quiet; then, it seems to me it is possible to communicate.”

~ Krishnamurti

1. The Sacred Pause - Self-Empathy (Internal Self Awareness Dialogue)

Why Self-Empathy?

When we are unaware of our biases, judgments and triggers and are unable to moderate them, they inadvertently drive our interactions, thereby projecting our needs, fears, concerns and agenda without awareness of our needs.

What is Self-Empathy?

Self-Awareness

The first step is to become aware of what is happening in your body. We are trained to **think** about what we are feeling rather than actually allow ourselves to be aware of what we are

actually feeling and **experiencing** in our bodies. Yet, it is our bodies that react first, not our minds!

Before you can begin to explore what your needs are, it is important to recognize that you are reacting and be able to interrupt your reaction so you can choose how to respond. Think of something someone said or did that triggered you (caused you to react). Write down what they said.

Notice Your Body Reaction

When you think of the person saying that, what do you feel in your body? Where do you feel it? Try to describe it in detail.

Tension Scale

On a scale of 1-10, (10 being high) how tense or upset do you feel?

If you fail to pause and notice that you are having your own internal reaction, it is highly likely that your internal reaction will drive your response. Becoming a witness to your internal process is the first step. The second step is to learn to self soothe so that you can **decide** how to respond rather than simply react.

Self Soothe

Take some deep breaths in your belly and chest and stay with your breath until you feel your tension releasing. Put both hands on your heart and breathe into your heart. Continue to monitor your body reactions and tension level. What do you feel in your body now? What is your tension level now?

Inner Exploration

Once you are feeling calmer, you can begin to explore your inner world. This self-awareness helps you determine how to respond in a way that makes it likely you will be effective, instead of reacting from your emotional self.

1. Identify what you are reacting to

What or who does this remind me of from my past?

Why am I feeling so reactive or defensive?

Where did I learn to respond this way?

2. Identify your feelings and needs

What do I FEEL?

What do I NEED?

Then ask yourself again the same questions:

What do I FEEL?
What do I NEED?

And ask yourself the same questions again:
What do I FEEL?
What do I NEED?

The reason you ask yourself the same questions **three** times (or more!) is because with each new time, you become more aware of your deeper needs and become more curious and open.

2. Empathy – for the other person

Why Empathy?

Understanding the other person's feelings and needs helps transform conversations from one of trying to convince the other person of your position to one of deeper understanding and connection, thereby making it possible to collaborate and understand one another.

What is Empathy?

Listening empathically is not agreement. You do not have to agree with the other person's experience, story or beliefs to be empathic. Nor is empathy sympathy!

Empathy is the process of bringing a quality of presence and non-judgmental compassion and curiosity. This serves a few purposes.

First, bringing an empathic presence helps soothe and calm the other person, thereby shifting them from their reptilian brain (a place of fight, flight or freeze) to their pre-frontal cortex where they are better able to hear, be open to new information, and make reasoned decisions.

Second, when you engage with the other person in this way, you have a deeper understanding of their needs. This can help you find solutions that work for everyone, to have greater compassion and to understand your differences without being dismissive.

Third, they gain deeper insight into their own needs and are thereby better able to imagine different solutions to meet their needs.

Empathy involves reflecting back what you are hearing the person say to give them a sense of being gotten. To do this effectively, I think of it as if the person has explained a picture or story to me and I am painting that picture or telling that story back to him/her. I often use metaphors and language that captures their experience. I listen extremely carefully to the words they use because people often talk in metaphors and pictures and then I reflect that back. When you listen very carefully to what people say, you often hear them talk about their needs.

Four-Step Process

Presence/Silent Listening – bring a quality of presence so we can truly hear and they have a sense of genuine care and presence

Reflection - Reflect what we are hearing

“So what I'm hearing you say is that you are really angry because he called you evil and pathetic.”

Reframe – Reframe what is being said into the underlying feelings and needs

“I’m wondering if you are upset because you want to be treated respectfully?”

General Reframing Language:

Are you feeling ___ because you need ___?

Deepening Needs Awareness – Deepen into the needs

“Is it that you just really want some respect?”

“Is there something else that really matters to you?” “If you had respect, what would that do for you?”

Basic Empathy Guess (silent or verbal)

Formal: Are you feeling [state feeling] because you need [state need]?

Example: Are you feeling upset because you want to be treated respectfully?

Colloquial: Are you [state feeling] because you [state need]?

Example: Are you upset because you want respect?

You can elaborate and use more than one word, but be careful to not attach the need/interest to the person or situation the person is talking about. Remember – **a value/need/interest is not attached to a person, place, time, situation, outcome, etc.** The person, place, time, situation, or outcome are strategies to get our needs met.

It is helpful to put the value/need in the positive (because you so value . . .) rather than the negative (because your need for . . . was not met). Wording it this way helps the other person connect with the beauty or power of the need rather than what is missing in their lives. It is much easier to problem-solve when the need is stated in the positive than in the negative.

3. Empathy Is Not

An intellectual exercise

Agreement (You have every right to be angry; I agree with you.)

Sympathy (I’m so sorry you are feeling upset. I do too.)

Giving advice (I think you should just . . .)

Fixing it (Do you think it would help if you . . .)

Going into your own story (That happened to me, listen to this . . .)

Minimizing their experience (That’s nothing . . .)

Telling someone else how they feel or what they need.

Data collection (When did you first notice . . .?)

Reassuring (It will be ok . . . You can definitely do it . . .)

Consoling (It wasn’t your fault.)

Educating (You can learn something from this.)

Investigation (How did this happen.)

Shut Down (Don’t worry.)

Explain it away (She only did that because . . .)

Blame Others (He did that; what a jerk.)

Blame the Speaker (If only you had . . .)

Guilt Trip (If you really cared, you would have . . .)

Blame Yourself (Sorry, it’s my fault.)

B. COMPASSIONATE SPEAKING

We speak compassionately by communicating without judgment, blame or criticism. Just as in compassionate listening, we can speak compassionately through our intention and the actual words we use. To do this, it is important that we take responsibility for what we feel and what we need without holding the other person responsible for either our feelings or our needs.

One of the purposes of compassionately expressing ourselves is to provide feedback to the other person about how their actions have impacted us. We want to do this compassionately because it is more likely the person will hear our concerns and that our concerns may actually impact the choices or behaviors they make then if we are judgmental, critical or blaming.

When you are triggered, it is important to first understand the origin of your own reactivity and to make sure you respond, not from your trigger, but from a place of internal clarity.

There are a few basic principles to help you speak compassionately, powerfully and clearly. **Empathy before Education.**

1. Identify your triggers and practice self-awareness and self-empathy
2. Practice empathy (silent first) towards the other person
3. Be genuinely curious
4. Affirm your positive intention to be curious, to want to learn and understand, to focus on your goal of respectful communication and collaborative problem-solving
5. Describe the situation with a clear observation void of evaluation or judgment
6. Express your feelings by using “I” statements (not I feel that you . . .)
7. State your need (not what you want the other person to do)
8. Make a clear request – different requests reflect different intentions and needs
 - a. To be heard: You may first want to ask the person to reflect back what he heard you say.
 - b. To hear the other person: You may then want to hear how the other person feels or what they think about what you said. Listen with curiosity and openness. This is the opportunity for you to provide empathy to the other person.
 - c. To act or do something concrete: You may simply want to ask the other person to do something such as meet with you at 10:00.

This dialogue can continue going back and forth with you expressing and being heard and then the other person expressing and being heard. Once you both are heard, then you can begin to explore solutions. Once everyone has been heard and has had a chance

to express him/herself, you are more likely to find creative solutions. Keep an open mind. Imagine that you can and will find a solution you never thought of before that may actually be mutually beneficial. Explore how you can collaborate with curiosity, adventure and creativity.

Example: “When I hear you say that you think going to war in Iran is a good idea and the only solution I feel scared and worried about that because I want to find peaceful ways to solve differences so people are safe.”

Different possible requests:

1. To be heard: “Would you be willing to tell me what you heard is important to me?”
2. To hear the other person: “I’m curious what comes up for you hearing that, would you be willing to tell me?”

9. Share your information