

# Building Emotional Intimacy: Empathy

## Empathy: What It Is and Why It Matters

One of the most powerful ways that we can demonstrate love and connect with one another is to be empathetic. How we respond matters.

*Empathy is the ability to understand and identify with the feelings of another without being judgmental.*

Imagine you're in a boat on a glacial lake and your spouse decides to take a swim in the frigid water. After your spouse jumps in, you quickly observe them starting to drown. Showing empathy excludes judgment for jumping into the lake and requires more than just throwing out the life ring. You actually have to jump in, feel the frigid waters yourself, help them put the life ring on, and get them to safety. This is not the time for a lecture or asking them what they were thinking!

When a husband or wife moves toward their spouse—whether in the form of sharing a painful childhood experience, confessing a current sin, or expressing a strong emotion about a difficult work situation—they are putting themselves at risk of being wounded by how their spouse responds to their vulnerability. Few people find it easy to reveal their imperfections or admit what they are really thinking and feeling. How we respond matters.

When we respond with empathy toward our spouse, they feel accepted, loved, and known. When we show that we care, our spouse can see that they have value and worth in our eyes—and, more importantly, in God's eyes. This shows them honor in a moment when they could be tempted to spiral in shame.

## Empathy and the Brain

During moments of intense emotion or stress, human brains stop functioning in the interconnected way in which they were designed, specifically in the ability to listen, to reason, or to be analytical. Research has shown that if empathy is offered in those moments, it has the capacity to settle, soothe, and reset the mind. The best way, then, to show care is to offer empathy first. Later, this can be followed with further conversations that provide clarity, truth, and even offer direction or problem solving.

## Empathy and Humility

It is important to note that *responding with empathy is not just a discipline to master, but also an attitude of the heart.* As disciples of Jesus, we were once considered “enemies of God” (Rom 5:10), “dead in our sin” (Eph 2:1), people who “followed the ways of the world and the enemy” (Eph 2:2), and “sought to gratify the cravings of our flesh and were deserving of God's wrath” (Eph 2:3). But “by God's grace we have been saved” (Eph 2:5) and we are now “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6).

The gospel is so critical as it relates to expressing empathy. We don't just “turn on” empathy. Rather, when the attitude of our heart is humility, empathy comes more naturally because we have a very accurate view of ourselves and of God. We know that there is a God—and we are not him. We are clearly aware of the depth of our own sin and are immeasurably grateful for God's grace, forgiveness, and mercy in our own lives.

Therefore, when our spouse—another fellow imperfect human being—honors us by sharing their very vulnerable state of their imperfection (their fear, pain, shame, or even their shame for feeling shame, etc), the *attitude* of our response might sound like, “Wow. Thank you for sharing. I appreciate your trusting me enough to share this with me,” even if we do not say those words out loud. This stands in stark contrast to arrogant judgment or a contemptuous attitude, or being defensive, distracted, or distant.

Again, this Christ-like response may not always happen, but it's the perspective we should cultivate as we aim to grow in humility and love for our spouse. Otherwise, our attempts at empathy may feel forced, and we may get more and more disconnected and feel unappreciated by our spouse, both of which will likely result in more conflict.

## Empathy as a Growth Point

Most of us will agree that we have work to do in the area of becoming empathetic. Besides growing in humility, there is also a practical side to developing the skill of showing empathy.



For some of us, it is easy. Our natural bent is to respond with care and compassion when someone shares something with us. For others of us, it is more difficult. Our tendency might be to withhold empathy.

Here are some of the reasons we might withhold empathy:

- We don't have all the facts.
- The story doesn't make sense to us.
- We don't agree with their assessment of the situation.
- We think they are overreacting.
- We wouldn't be feeling or reacting this way if we were in the same situation.
- We question whether or not their emotions are "valid."
- We equate empathy with enabling.
- We believe that giving direction is more beneficial than offering empathy.
- We are uncomfortable—listening to their story may stir something in us we have not yet dealt with.
- We think they are acting like a victim.

If our spouse feels that in order to be understood, they have to meet our requirements, then it is going to be difficult to establish a trusting and healthy relationship.

So, how do we know if we are not responding with empathy? We need some clues to help us identify when this is happening.

Here are a some common non-empathetic responses/clues:

- **Aloof/changing the subject:** "Okay. Good to know. Have you seen the remote?"
- **Arrogance:** "Are you serious? I told you this would happen."
- **Blaming:** "You brought this on yourself; if you had only \_\_\_\_\_."
- **Contempt:** "You should have known better. (Moron)."
- **Enabling:** Being sympathetic and/or over-identifying without eventually pointing them to truth.
- **Fixing:** "I know what you can do; try \_\_\_\_\_."

- **Finishing sentences:** Assuming you know what they are going to say.
- **Minimizing:** "It could be worse" or "At least \_\_\_\_\_."
- **Over-spiritualizing:** "You wouldn't be so anxious if you would just trust God."
- **Self-centered:** "I understand. The same thing happened to me. The other day I \_\_\_\_\_."
- **Silent/distant:** "I can't take any more emotion!" (internally)

These responses drive disconnection. Some of them are almost second nature to us. This is particularly true when we do not reserve enough energy for our spouse. We can easily find ourselves putting all our relational energy into our work associates (or children at home) and, after an exhausting day, we have nothing left to offer our spouse.

With this in mind, we need to prioritize our spouse and preserve emotional energy so that we can show them value when they share things with us. Otherwise, our non-empathetic response minimizes their pain, shuts them down, or leaves them hanging. There is nothing worse than a spouse filled with regret and shame because what they have shared is met with a non-empathetic, damaging response. As this pattern of being dismissed repeats itself year after year, contempt and bitterness grows.

### **Responding with Empathy**

We build emotional intimacy by learning to respond with empathy. Developing this skill takes awareness of our relational tendencies as well as a willingness to *learn how to acknowledge what someone is saying, listen well, and ask good questions*. Here are some concrete ideas:

**Acknowledge** what is being shared with phrases like:

- I don't know what to say, but I am really glad you told me.
- Thank you for sharing that with me.
- I bet that was hard to tell me. Thank you for trusting me with that.
- I can see how that would be so hard and frustrating.
- I know that hurts.
- I am really sorry you were treated this way.



**Value your spouse with your words.** Remember, “life and death is in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). We have the opportunity to breathe life through our words as we appreciate our spouse sharing their thoughts and feelings with us. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we agree with them in their assessment of the situation, how they are feeling, or even how they are reacting, but it does mean we accept them as a fellow brother or sister in Christ.

In moments of conflict, it can be very difficult to move past our pride. Therefore, it is critical to check the attitude of your heart and remember your own humanity and imperfection. It is also important that you and your spouse are intentional and practice responding to each other with empathy when you are not in conflict.

You want to *create some empathetic “muscle memory”* so that when conflict arises, you have the language to respond in a caring and healthy way—even if you have to literally bite your tongue and simply say, “thank you for sharing.” If you have been practicing empathetic phrases together in times of relational peace, in the moment of conflict, hopefully your spouse will believe the best as they see you attempting to humble yourself, use your common language, and move toward them.

**Acknowledging our spouse’s pain is just the beginning.** Sometimes we do have to choose to “fake it til we make it” (ie, be kind) as we strive to humble ourselves and “treat (our spouse’s) interest as more important than our own” (Philippians 2:4).

But, while actions speak louder than words, our attitude ultimately shows itself in actions. A true empathic connection requires our time, energy, compassion, courage, wisdom, and reliance on the Spirit. Remember the goal is to understand what they are experiencing. This takes time. Aim to *put yourself in their shoes*. Seek to identify with how they are feeling in the moment.

If you can, try to remember a time when you felt a similar way. You might have to dig deep into your memory to access a situation where you may have felt something similar. Remembering what you felt like will help you try to understand what they may be experiencing. *What you felt in that moment in time is perhaps a similar feeling to what your spouse is feeling, only theirs is magnified in real-time.*

Now that you can somewhat identify with how they might be feeling, proverbially “sit with them in the mud pit,” without trying to clean them up. Be present with them without offering your stories or opinions.

If you are not a “feeler,” you can still be empathetic by showing that you understand what they feel and why they feel that way. Using sentences that show that you know them can validate your connection: “I know you worked so hard to do a good job. I totally understand why that criticism was so hard to hear.”

If you are struggling to know how to connect with them, just ask! Ask them what they need from you right now. Do they need you to just hold them? Do they need you to just be quiet and sit with them? Do they need you to listen without fixing? Do they need some space? Do they need you to take care of something in order for them to be able to have some time alone? Empathy is communicated with both words and actions that let your spouse know that you understand what they are experiencing.

**How they feel may not be accurate or true, but it is very real to them.** Take off your husband or wife cap for a moment and just listen. Listen as a brother or sister in Christ who genuinely cares. Withhold judgment and “take tender care of those who are weak, being patient with everyone” (1Thessalonians 5:14). Acknowledging what they are experiencing and responding empathetically builds a pathway for connection

#### Listening well:

- Communicates that you care about what is being said and that you want to understand what they are thinking and feeling.
- Gives you the opportunity to gather information so that you can better understand and ask additional questions.
- Allows you to pick up on clues to know when you need to take a break from the conversation.
- Builds intimacy and is a pathway to connection.

#### Asking Good Questions

Be curious. Ask questions that help you understand more of what they are thinking and feeling. Remember, this time is not about you. That said, when the time is right for you to



respond, you will be more informed and better positioned to speak truth to their situation. Listening well will help guide the questions that you ask.

- **Open-ended questions** are non-offensive and show your spouse that you are seeking to understand them and/or their situation.
  - » Tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_.
  - » Can you clarify what you meant by \_\_\_\_\_?
  - » How are you feeling right now? (ie. hurt, anger, sadness, fear, loneliness, shame, guilt, gladness)
- **Direct questions** help us obtain important information to help us determine what they need from us and how we can best care for them.
  - » What happened?
  - » What do you need from me? (ie. “Do you want me to help you process and fix the situation or just be present with you and listen?”)
- **Heart questions** invite them to share what they think, believe, and care about. These questions need to be asked after you have demonstrated that you understand what they are experiencing and they feel heard. Heart questions happen when the intensity of the moment has passed and your spouse feels relationally safe.
  - » What is the story you are telling yourself right now in your head? About God? About yourself? About others?
  - » What is your greatest fear right now?
  - » What does it look like to entrust this to God?

After asking these questions, it is important to acknowledge and appreciate your spouse for opening up and sharing these additional insights with you. “Thank you for sharing” is always appropriate as well as asking how you can best support and love them right now.

Sources:

The Soul of Shame, Curt Thompson

Unashamed, Heather Davis Nelson

Shame Interrupted, Ed Welch

Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands, Paul David Tripp

