

# Growing in Empathy

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Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another without being judgmental. Empathy says, “I get it. I’m with you.” You can think of empathy as getting in the boat with a friend who is lost at sea, rather than standing on the shore telling them where to go or judging them for being in the boat in the first place.

Empathy is a skill that we have to practice and develop. It does not come easily for most of us. In order to help us grow in this area we need to identify some non-empathetic ways in which we may normally respond to someone when they are vulnerable with us and share their struggles.

Here are a few common responses:

- **Minimizing:** “It could be worse...” or “At least...”
- **Over-spiritualizing/using Bible verses as spiritual Band-Aids:** “God uses all things for our good...”
- **Quick Problem Solving:** “I know what you can do, try...”
- **Blaming:** “You brought this on yourself, if you had only...”
- **Making It About You:** “That’s nothing! Let me tell you about when I...”
- **Silence or changing the subject:** ignoring or not acknowledging what the person shared
- **Enabling:** being sympathetic and/or over-relating without eventually pointing them to truth

These responses minimize a person’s pain and will shut them down.

1. Has your vulnerability ever been squelched by one of these responses? How did it make you feel? What did you think in that moment?

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2. As hurtful as these can be, we all use them. Can you identify a few responses that you tend to use with others? Write them below.

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Let’s take a closer look at two of the errors we make when someone is vulnerable with us: **Enabling** and **Quick Problem Solving**.

**Enabling** responses may seem helpful because the focus is on connecting with the person and validating their pain. While this is good, it ultimately falls short if it allows a person to remain where they are rather than helping them move beyond it. It is seeing your friend in a hole and saying, “Oh man! That’s terrible. I am so sorry,” and then walking on by. An enabling response



is hyper focused on the person's pain but does not include the life- giving wisdom and direction they may need in order find their way out of the hole. This type of response can leave a person weak and in a helpless and hopeless state.

**Quick Problem Solving** responses also seem helpful because the focus is on helping the person fix their problem. This also falls short because quick problem solving doesn't fix the problem of pain. It is seeing your friend down in the hole and throwing them a ladder but never stopping to see if they are okay. Quick problem solving is hyper focused on the solution but ignores the pain a person may be experiencing. This type of response might even increase a person's feelings of shame, failure, and isolation.

On their own, both of these responses lack true compassion and concern. These two errors are often more about our own discomfort with suffering than they are about helping the other person. We will vacillate between these two errors depending on our own personality, our relationship to the person who is suffering, our schedules, and a variety of other factors.

A true empathic connection requires our time, energy, compassion, courage, wisdom and discernment. We cannot be in a hurry if we are going to extend empathy to another! Empathy begins with connecting relationally, emotionally, spiritually and physically with the other person.

#### **The beginning stages of empathy:**

- Invite others into a safe relationship with you where they can be fully known and loved
- Climb down into the hole and sit with them while they regain their bearings
- Suffer alongside them
- Consider the other person's perspective, validate their suffering (this does not mean that you have to agree with what they are feeling or their interpretation of events)
- Connect with the feeling, not the experience
- Listen well; let them talk
- Ask open ended questions
  - » What was that like?
  - » How did it make you feel?
  - » Help me understand?
  - » Can you tell me more?
- Demonstrate empathy with phrases like:
  - » I don't know what to say, but I am really glad you told me.
  - » It sounds like you are in a really hard place.
  - » I know that hurts, I've been there.
  - » I am really sorry you were treated this way.

As we have learned, when someone is in the midst of a shaming experience or exposing a part of themselves to you, they are very vulnerable. Sometimes even telling the story makes them feel as if they are right back in the middle of the event-even if it happened years ago. It's important to stay in the boat with them as long as it takes to help them know that they are seen,

heard, loved and known. This may take a while, or even take place over several conversations. There is a time and place for gently offering wise counsel, to throw them a truth life-line, but we do not need to be too quick to rush the process.

### **Helping Them Out of the Hole**

Empathy invites others into a safe relationship with us - where they can be known, where they can be vulnerable. But understanding alone leaves a person in their frailty and weakness. Understanding without direction leaves us impotent. We have to help others rewrite their shame stories. We have to help them shift their focus from self to God, to view their story through God's eyes and see how God might be at work in their lives.

Eventually, empathy must include guidance and direction. To exercise true empathy is to love someone enough to not leave them where they are. But it is crucial to understand that in order to hear truth, they must first experience a listening empathetic voice, from one who is willing to be the hands and feet of Jesus to them.

Doing the work of creating a safe relational environment, plows up the soil of a wounded heart and makes it fertile ground to begin planting seeds of truth. It is through this connection with the other person that we can begin to gently re-frame the lies of shame and replace them with the truth about who God is and who they are in Christ. Pointing them to Christ and his comfort is ultimately the only way they will be able to rewrite their own story and find him in it.

### **Jesus is the Great Empathizer**

Time after time Jesus demonstrates empathy to those who come to him in pain. Ultimately, for us, Jesus is the great empathizer who interrupts our shame and releases us from its bondage. He looked down on our vulnerable and needy state; he saw us, heard us, knew us and loved us. So Jesus, the one who created the universe, made himself subject and vulnerable to it by becoming like us in every way. In doing so, he descended into the hole with us and provided us a way out through his own suffering. Now, as those created in his image, we are able to extend true empathy to others.

