

Empathy, Listening Skills & Relationships

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Introduction -- Empathy Defined

Most individuals think of empathy as having a sense of understanding and compassion for another person, sensing what it must be like to be them. As we work to develop a measure of empathy in our EQ assessment tool, we have identified three key aspects of empathy. These include 1) Empathic accuracy: being able to sense what the other person is experiencing from their internal experience, 2) Empathic compassion: being able to be open to another's experience with compassion and tolerance, and 3) Empathic interactions: the process of interacting in an empathic manner.

Empathic acknowledgment is the core process and precise skill of empathic interactions. While the concept of empathy is embraced, the specific skills required are not widely known and certainly not widely practiced. Dr. Bookbinder states less than 2% of interactions include acknowledgement of the other, the foundation for all empathic interactions.

This article highlights the critical elements of empathic acknowledgement and the precise skills required for effective, powerful empathic interactions.

Empathic Acknowledging

Empathic acknowledging combines listening, empathizing, and acknowledging what the other person said and his or her experience. It typically improves relationships and often deepens emotional intimacy. It leads to feeling like you have received a "psychological hug". Why? The following encounter illustrates empathic acknowledgement. NOTES are interjected to highlight the concept.

Illustration: The Astonished Man (Dr. Bookbinder experience)

I was walking to the exit of a four-story parking building next to a five-story medical clinic. The day was Friday, the time was 2:25 pm, and the building was crammed with cars. A man, who appeared about 75-years-old, walked in. As he neared me, he stopped, turned towards me and said: "Are they giving something away today? I've never seen it so crowded." He appeared unable to believe that the building was filled to capacity. "I'll bet it's because many people don't work on Fridays, so it's convenient for them to schedule their appointments on Fridays," I said.

(NOTE: My response did not acknowledge either his perception of the building as crowded or his astonishment that it was crowded. I had given him an explanation, not an acknowledgement.)

"It's not because it's Friday. I usually come here on Fridays and it's never been this crowded," he said. "It is very crowded today, and I don't know why," I said.

(NOTE: I had now acknowledged his perception that the building was crowded! He probably would have been more satisfied if I had also acknowledged his feeling.)

Discussion

In the situation above he listened to the astonished man and empathized with his perception that the garage was full. He acknowledged the man by spending time listening to the astonished man's statement and acknowledging his statement by stating his understanding of it.

Key elements to Empathic acknowledgements:

- Listening to what the other is saying
- Acknowledging what was said, including stating your understanding of what was said and the feelings associated with what was said

The Psychological Hug

One important benefit of empathic acknowledging is the psychological hug. The psychological hug is similar to a physical hug in that it expresses affection by a special type of touch. This affection and touch is illustrated by the interaction between friends below. Empathic acknowledging can be effective between any two people when one of them is talking about something that is important to him or her.

An Illustration: The Upset Friend

Tanya and Anita, who are in their twenties, meet for lunch one Friday after not having talked with each other for two months. Tanya (talker) began in delight. "I saw Ben yesterday. You remember Ben? I told you about him last time." Anita acknowledged, "Sure. You met him a month before our last lunch and found him attractive." "That's right," Tanya says, eyes sparkling. "Since then I've learned that he's good for me. We've been seeing a lot of each other lately and getting close. I'm excited!" As Tanya begins to pour out the details of her recent experiences with Ben, Anita says to herself, I was going to tell her about my super vacation plans but this relationship sounds really important to her. I'll wait and listen to her news first.

(NOTE: Anita suppresses the impulse to talk)

Five minutes later, Tanya concludes with her announcement. "Last Tuesday he told me he loved me", followed by her exclamation, "I couldn't believe it!" After listening for the entire time without saying a word, Anita says, "Wow!"

(NOTE: Anita acknowledges Tanya's feeling of being overwhelmed)

"I still can't believe it," Tanya says. "I didn't know what to say. I still don't know what to tell him." "I don't understand," Anita says. "Did he expect you to say how you felt about him?"

(Note: Anita clarifies what is being said)

Tanya responds "I didn't think so but I wanted to say something and yet I didn't want to. I'm confused." Her face changes from pink to pale and she stops talking. "It's hard for you to talk about this." "I didn't think it would be so hard but I do want to tell you," Tanya says. "I, uh, I feel strongly about Ben." She struggles to speak but again stops, and her face turns paler. After waiting ten seconds, Anita says "And what else?" She then resumes being quiet and waits for Tanya to regain her ability to speak.

(Note: Anita waits & encourages Tanya to continue)

Sixty more seconds pass and then Tanya's jaw tightens as she says, "I want to tell you how I really feel about him. He's a wonderful man and I'm, uh, I'm very fond of him." She pauses. "I'm more than fond of him. I, uh, I, uh, I love him. There, I finally said it. Whew!" As she listens to Tanya open up emotionally, Anita develops a lump in her throat and a warm feeling in her chest. She gulps, pauses to collect her thoughts, and softly says, "It's hard for you to talk about your love for Ben."

(Note: Anita acknowledges what is being said & the feelings)

You honor the person talking when you spend the time to listen & the energy to pay attention.

"Definitely," Tanya says. "After Tuesday, I decided that the next time I saw him I would tell him how I felt about him. Well, the next time came and I still couldn't tell him. There must be something seriously wrong with me." Anita..."You're saying that no matter how hard you try, you can't tell him you love him, and you feel awful about yourself because you can't."

(Note: Acknowledgement of what is being said and feelings)

"Right!" Tanya says. "I've been keeping it to myself and becoming terribly upset about it. I'm glad I told you because you didn't criticize me for not speaking up. Your understanding touches me." Her face relaxes and begins to regain its color. With affection in her eyes and gentleness in her voice, Tanya says, "I feel better. Thanks for letting me talk." "Glad to do it", Anita says. Her face brightens as she says "Now I want to tell you about a two-week vacation in Cape Cod I'm planning, which I can't wait to begin." Then she leans forward and delightedly describes her plans to Tanya, who, because of no longer being upset, is able to listen attentively.

Discussion & Conclusion:

Key elements of empathic acknowledgment illustrated above. Anita...

- Does not interrupt
- Does not give advice
- Does not change the subject to talk about her own plans
- Does not voice disapproval of the other
- Tunes into the other's communications (what is being said & her feelings)
- States her understanding of what is being said and felt

The impact Anita's (Listener) empathic acknowledgement had on Tanya (talker)

- Appreciation for being listened to
- Experience as receiving a gift of time and attention without criticism or advice
- Increased trust of myself (the talker) and increased trust in the other and the relationship
- The feeling of receiving affection, a psychological hug that touches the heart
- Reduced Tanya's distress
- Helped Tanya (talker) to get in touch with her thoughts, wants, and feelings
- Strengthened the relationship

Benefits to the Talker

Experiencing a psychological hug is one of several possible benefits for the talker.

Other benefits include

- Re-experiencing joy and one's own personal power and choice
- Making sense of a puzzling situation
- Becoming aware of unconscious feelings
- Experiencing relief from distress
- Ending a conflict about a decision
- Gaining needed clarity to make a decision about next steps or actions to take
- Feeling of less alone
- Obtaining relief from health problems such as asthma, insomnia, headaches, back pain

An Illustration: Ending a conflict about a decision.

After being absent from work for a week from the flu, I informed my wife, Louise, in the evening, that I was feeling well enough to return the next day. The evening progressed into morning but my recovery regressed. My malaise was worsened by my becoming upset about not feeling well enough to work. "I'm frustrated," I complained to Louise. "I've been out too long but can't decide whether or not to go back to work tomorrow." "Stay home another day," she said. "Make sure you're well before you go back or you'll soon get sick again." Her unsolicited advice irritated me, which she noticed and which prompted her to respond by acknowledging my experience: "I know you're disappointed that you still don't feel well enough to go back to work." I immediately responded to her acknowledgment by no longer feeling irritated and ending my conflict between wanting to return to work but not feeling well enough. I then had no trouble deciding to stay home another day.

Empathic acknowledging can satisfy people's needs to reveal aspects of their inner world to others and to have their revelations acknowledged.

An Illustration: Feeling less alone with a problem.

During Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, alcoholics talk more freely about their drinking problem than they would with most people. During meetings of a support group for relatives of mentally ill persons, the members talk more freely about their struggles to help their ill loved ones. I believe that a major reason support groups are popular is that members feel less alone with their problem because of the opportunities to talk about it with people who listen with empathy.

Benefits for the Acknowledger

We tend to focus on the benefit to the talker rather than the "acknowledger", yet both gain real and powerful benefits. The process itself is one of mutuality where both individuals are enriched.

Possible benefits for the "acknowledger include:

- Absorbing some of the joy, clarity, peace or other benefits the talker experiences
- Feeling good about giving another an opportunity to talk about something that matters to him or her
- Reducing conflict or avoiding a quarrel with another by careful listening & mutual inquiry
- Broadening your horizons and expanding your world by listening to another whose values and views are radically different from your own
- Feeling psychologically hugged by the talker

Illustration: Feeling hugged by the talker.

(Using the Tanya & Anita discussion above)

Tanya feels affectionately touched by Anita's empathy, listening skills, and acknowledging. She feels valued by Anita and affection for her. These feelings embolden Tanya to speak from her heart to Anita. Tanya's openness and her speaking words from the heart create a feeling of affection and connectedness within Anita. She feels valued by Tanya. The conclusion is Tanya's

Empathically acknowledging another person can touch the person's heart.

response to Anita's empathic acknowledging stimulates a similar set of feelings in Anita. Each feels hugged by the other and each one's heart that is open to the other, and they experience a precious moment of heart-to-heart connection.

Controlling the Urge to Help

Effective empathy requires a skill more fundamental than the ones presented above. This skill is the need to control your urge to help and of being present with the other person in the conversation. Most of us rarely think of empathic acknowledging as a way of being present with the person talking. Instead we usually respond to an upset person by giving advice, words of encouragement or words of comfort -- three common ways of trying to help. While these are well-intentioned responses, they interfere with the other person's talking because these verbalizations stem from our thinking about how to help rather than thinking about what the talker's words mean to him or her.

Being present involves thinking about what the talker's words mean to her, not what they mean to you. The challenge and the power is to be fully present with another person. Allow, encourage, and make the space for them to gain self-awareness and access their own truth and reveal themselves in ways that are most useful for them.

If you want to help when, for example, conversing with an upset person, you may find it useful to keep in mind the following thought:

Illustration: Helping versus Not Helping

When Tanya condemns herself for being unable to tell Ben she loves him, Anita responds by acknowledging Tanya's problem: "You're saying that no matter how hard you try, you can't get yourself to tell him you love him, and you feel awful that you can't."

(NOTE: She does not try to help by advising: ("Maybe it would be easier to tell him in writing) She does not try to help by comforting ("There's anything wrong with not being able to tell him you love him. You're just shy about these things.") She does not try to help by encouraging ("Hang in there, Tanya. I'll bet in a month or two you'll be able to tell him."))

Think of empathic acknowledging not as a way of helping but as a way of being present with the person talking.

Controlling the Urge to Talk

Research on conversations has found that the person not talking usually starts talking about nine-tenths of a second after the other person stops. Combining this statistic with the one that only two percent of us know about the activity of acknowledging the talker's communication leads me to the following conclusion:

When listening to another person during a conversation we usually find it difficult to wait

Developing the ability to wait, listen, and encourage the other to talk without interrupting is a critical skill. It can be developed by intentional awareness and with practice. Several practice exercises are provided below. These exercises can help increase your awareness of the option to listen. Being more aware of opportunities to switch from talking to listening expands your consciousness and choice. They will help increase your flexibility and ease in using empathy effectively. The exercises are easy and can be practiced anywhere.

Exercise 1: Practice with a partner

Find a partner. Set a timer for 90 seconds and have your partner talk about any subject. You listen without interrupting. When the timer beeps, she stops talking and you summarize her words and any feelings expressed. When finished discuss the experience. What was it like for you? What was it like for your partner? Reverse roles and repeat the exercise.

You may be surprised to find yourself struggling to wait for the beep before you talk. This discovery could strengthen your motivation to control the urge to talk. Also, your agreement to summarize what you heard will most likely cause you to pay more attention to the other person's words and overall expression.

Exercise 2: Exercise in self-awareness and choice

The next time you are listening and find yourself ready to talk about your interests, but the talker has not paused, continue listening. If the other has paused, wait two or three seconds. If she/he resumes talking, continue listening. If she does not resume, talk.

The reason for waiting is that the talker might be pausing to organize her thoughts before continuing to talk.

Exercise 3: Practice listening & summarizing

When the talker pauses for more than two or three seconds and you are ready to talk about your interests, summarize instead. If he or she resumes talking, continue listening. If she or he does not resume, talk.

The talker may feel encouraged to continue talking after knowing you understood her words. Or she may pause because she is not sure you want to hear more but is reluctant to ask. However, when you summarize her words instead of talk about your interests, she may conclude you want to hear more.

Summarizing is, of course, acknowledging the talker's words, not his feelings. For this exercise summarizing what was said is sufficient. It makes the exercise easy to do and has value. Letting the talker know you heard and understand his or her feelings is a plus if it is apparent and easy to do.

Pace of Practice:

Do the exercises at a pace comfortable for you. For example, practice exercise #2 two to five minutes a day for a week. Then increase your time to six to ten minutes a day for the next week or two. Gradually do this exercise more often--to the limits of your tolerance for temporarily not thinking or talking about your interests.

Basic Skills

The following is a review of the basic skills discussed above.

These basic skills include:

- Listening without interruption
- Listening with your head and your heart
- Focusing on what the other person is saying and the meaning it has to them
- Asking for clarification when needed
- Tolerating the other persons attitude -- without disapproving
- Holding an attitude of openness to the others experience and position

*We usually
need to
remind
ourselves
of the option
to listen
whereas we
rarely need
to remind
ourselves
of the option
to talk.*

- Withholding the desire to help or interrupt
- Being fully present with the other person
- Encouraging the other to continue until they are finished
- Acknowledging the other persons words and feelings--what you understand
- Be open to correction or additions by the other so you "get it"

Illustration: Bigoted Father

Al (the acknowledger) is a white civil rights activist who has fought racial discrimination in housing and jobs. He has often heard his white neighbor Tom (Talker) voice contempt for entire groups of people, such as African-Americans, Jews and Hispanics. Al resents Tom's bigotry.

One Sunday afternoon, as Al is washing his Ford Escort in his driveway, Tom runs out of his house and across the street to Al. He huffs and grins as he says: "Pamela just called to tell me that Dave committed himself to her!" Al requests clarification: "Committed himself?" "Yes, he proposed over brunch at Denny's," Tom replies. "They're getting married in two months." When Tom's daughter called, his wife and 16-year-old son were at the town's shopping mall. There was no one at home with whom to share his joy. His inner world at the moment is his joy about his daughter's engagement and interest in expressing his joy. Al perceives the obvious--that Tom wants to tell him more about the good news. However, he is upset that Tom wants him to listen. Al says to himself: *Why should I care about hearing his good news? He doesn't care about a lot of people. He's a damn bigot!*

Al wants to say that he does not have time to listen because he has too many chores that afternoon. However, he chooses to tolerate being upset a bit longer in order to decide whether to tell Tom he is too busy. Al thinks: *I resent his bigotry but not the rest of him. This is truly an important day in his life.* This new thought leads Al to change from disapproving to openness towards Tom, now viewing him as a caring father. He then decides to give Tom more time and is able to pay attention to Tom's verbal and nonverbal communications--words, voice tone and facial expression--because thinking of him as a bigot and resenting his bigotry no longer distracts him. He is listening with both his head and heart.

Although Tom does not say he is excited, his body language--broad smile and animated voice--communicates it. Al acknowledges Tom's words and feelings. "You're excited about Pamela's good news." "I'm excited and also relieved," Tom responds. "Pamela envies her two sisters because they're happy with their husbands and children. She's 34 and the oldest, you know, and was distressed about not finding a man with whom to share her life and have children. It upset me that she felt unfulfilled." Al, sensing that Tom is bursting with things to tell, encourages him to continue by saying "Go on."

Uniqueness of Empathic Acknowledging Concepts & Skills

- ***The emphasis is on comprehending the meaning of what the person is saying to you rather than remembering the information or content of what is being said.***

For example, in the Bigoted Man illustration, Al remembering that Pamela took a giant step towards her deep-seated goal of marriage and motherhood is less important than Al comprehending what Pamela's taking this step means to Tom.

- ***Listening also emphasizes tuning into and having a mini-experience of the feelings communicated by the talker.***

For example, Al senses Tom's excitement about Pamela's engagement. The empathic acknowledger focuses on "tuning in" to the talker's inner world.

- ***Approving of or Openness to the Talker***

This is the most important empathic acknowledging activity. Presence and listening with empathic acknowledgement cannot occur without an honoring of the other person's experience and allowing what may be dramatic differences from our values.

To illustrate; Al responded to Tom's interest in talking about Pamela's engagement by thinking: *Why should I care about hearing his good news? He doesn't care about a lot of people. He's a damn bigot!* Al wanted to say that he did not have time to listen because he had too many chores to do that afternoon. However, he re-evaluated and concluded: *I resent his bigotry but not the rest of him. This is truly an important day in his life.* This conclusion led Al to change from disapproving of Tom -- a change from viewing him as a bigot to viewing him as a caring father. He then decided to listen to Tom. If Al had continued to view Tom only as a bigot, he would not have listened to him. Even if he had decided to listen, he would have done it poorly because of being distracted by thinking about Tom's bigotry and resenting his bigotry.

- ***Acknowledgement includes summarizing the words spoken and labeling the feelings transmitted.***
- ***The acknowledgment emerges from focusing on the talker's inner world not the listener's***
- ***The focus is on what the communication means to the talker, not to the acknowledger***
- ***Acknowledgement avoids adding anything to the talker's communication***

To illustrate, we will use one of Al's acknowledgements, which was: "You're no longer worried about Pamela now that she'll be achieving a goal she believes is essential." If he had psychologized about Tom's message, he might have either added to this acknowledgment or substituted for it the following: "You're pleased about her engagement validating your good job of raising her." Tom did not say that he believed his parenting of Pamela was validated. Deep down he might have thought this but an acknowledgment deals only with the obvious. We need to keep in mind that Al is Tom's neighbor, not his psychotherapist.

Maintaining a positive view of the person to whom you are listening can be one of the most difficult tasks of empathic acknowledging.

Illustration of avoiding adding anything to the communication

A fragment of a conversation between two friends will elaborate on another empathic acknowledging skill. Ann (Acknowledger) is appreciating Teresa's (Talker's) enjoyment of talking about skydiving even though Ann would be terrified to skydive. "Yesterday I did my best jump," Teresa declares with a joyous voice and sparkling eyes. "I knew exactly when to open my chute. I had the most control ever." "You're delighted with how you handled the chute," Ann responds. "Yes, but it's more than that," Teresa says. "This

jump was also the most thrilling for me. I was less nervous so I could get more into the experience of free fall. After a jump, I feel great for at least a week no matter what problems in my life come up..." And Teresa continues to tell Ann about her skydiving hobby. She enjoys describing an activity she values and experiences as thrilling. As she talks, an electric feeling courses through her body.

(NOTE: Ann did not interject to inquire or advise about the danger of skydiving. Although she is fearful and thought of the danger, she did not add it to the conversation. Her adding this would have been a distraction and have taken the talker away from exploring and reporting her own experience.)

Empathic Acknowledgement Requires Time & Energy

While acknowledging can enrich conversations, unfortunately few of us do it. For every 100 people, only 2 know of it and its value.

Empathic acknowledgement means an investment in learning and doing. Reading books and articles is not enough. You have to use the skills in conversations again and again as a way of living. Practicing takes time and can feel awkward, particularly if you find it difficult to control your urge to talk and to help. Controlling the urges to advise, comfort, encourage, etc. may drain your energy. Controlling the urge to talk about your interests and concerns may also drain your energy. One reason for the possible energy drain is that more energy is required to change an ingrained habit.

Learning Obstacles Some of us may find it extraordinarily difficult to use more empathy, listening skills, and acknowledgments, especially those who are constant talkers or constant helpers.

Illustration: Constant Talker:

I am eating dinner in a restaurant. In the next booth are two couples in their fifties. One of the men, whom I will call Conrad, is talking 95 percent of the time in a voice, which I can hear but people 20 feet away cannot. The other man and the two women nod or utter one-sentence comments. I am annoyed by Conrad's constant talking invading my privacy and I think: *That man is a constant talker and never would have married his wife if she were one too. He never would have become friendly with the other couple if either of them was a constant talker. He was attracted to these three people because they cheerfully listened to him and rarely interrupted. He does not realize that he has a strong need to be listened to that propels him towards people who will listen to him. This need is at the core of his psychological being. If a more aggressive talker wins the competition with him for grabbing the openings to talk, Conrad will become upset, and will not know why. In order to do empathic acknowledging, Conrad would have to turn his psychological being inside out. He may not be able to do this.*

*A person's way
of listening is
almost as
ingrained a
habit
as his or her
way of walking*

Illustration: Constant Helper:

Nancy is a mid-level manager in IBM whose supervisors view her work as outstanding. Her workday is crammed with activities such as deciding which of eight applicants to hire as the unit's senior secretary, and advising its chief programmer on supervising an errant programmer. Although her job requires working at a fast pace, she loves it. Whenever I

would talk to her about my concerns or problems, she would interrupt within three or four minutes to give me advice for which I did not ask. Even when I asked her simply to listen, she never would. Nancy is a high-powered problem solver who cannot turn off her advice-giving machine at the end of her workday. As she listens to me, she cannot stop thinking about how to help me, which distracts her from listening to and understanding my issues.

At home, her parents expected her to help them raise her younger brother and sister. Her functioning as a junior parent began soon after her brother was born when she was eight years old. Two years later, her sister's birth added a second responsibility. Much of Nancy's sense of self and self-esteem was derived from people's appreciation of her fix-it and care giving activities. She would have to turn herself inside out in order to be able to listen without thinking of how to help.

When to Acknowledge

Empathic acknowledgement takes presence and time. It is not needed and inappropriate in much of our day-to-day conversations. I am not advocating empathic acknowledgment zealotry. At the same time it is essential and can have a profound impact when used appropriately. There are some easy guidelines for becoming aware of appropriate times to use this skill.

Use When...

- **You sense the topic is important to the other person**
- **The other person is experiencing emotion**
- **The other person is speaking from his or her heart**

It is important to keep in mind that all three do not always occur during a conversation; for example, a person may be talking about something that is of high value to her without becoming emotional. As you practice you will develop a feel for when empathic acknowledgement would be useful. And you will become more tuned to nuance of expression and of the other's feelings.

With increased use of use of empathy, listening skills, and acknowledging you can expect a positive and powerful impact on your relationships. Most likely your current relationships will be strengthened and enriched. And you will develop meaningful and prosperous new relationships. This includes business relationships with your co-workers, direct reports, and your boss and your personal relationships among your family and friends.

Empathic acknowledgement is easy to understand and often hard to do, especially when we are tired, preoccupied, and/or have negative judgments about the other person. When your practice seems less than satisfactory notice the degree you are being fully present, listening without interruption, refraining from giving advice or help, and tuning into the other person's experience.

To read the original article go to: www.touch-another-heart.com,
Empathy, Listening skills & Touching Another Heart
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