

EMPATHY AS A PATHWAY TO RESILIENCE

Ask yourself.....

1. How do you nourish and look after yourself in times of stress or difficulty?
2. What self-care techniques do you practice to decompress, regulate and return to your window of tolerance?
3. How do you show empathy for others but ensure you don't take on too much of other people's energy, distress, or trauma?



What is empathy?

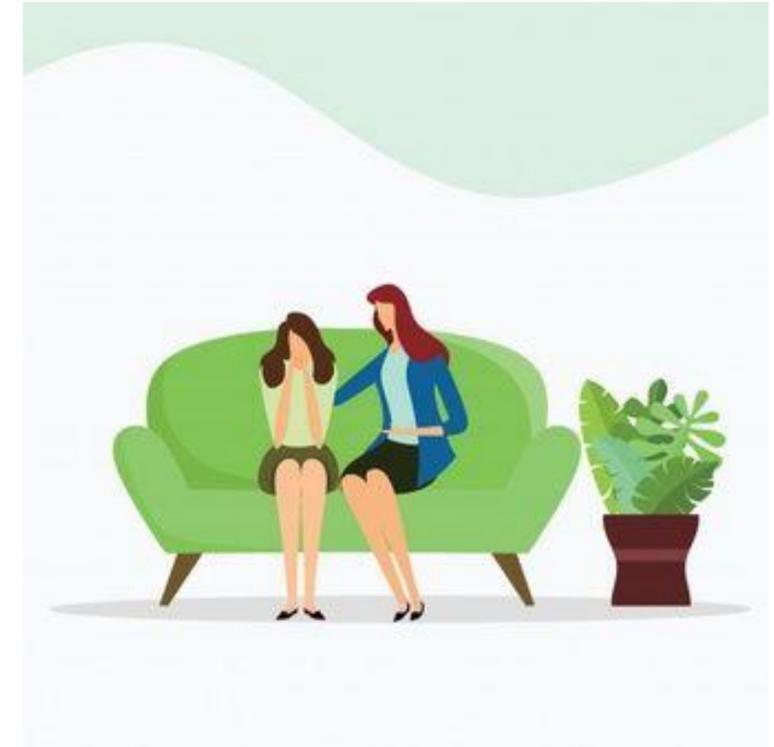
Empathy is the ability to understand and share someone else's feelings, to the extent of imagining what the other person is thinking or feeling, and responding with care. *Empathy is the intellectual identification of the thoughts, feelings, or state of another person.*

Emotional empathy refers to the experience of a deep connection with another person, including feeling distressed when observing the other person's distress.

Empathy is a key component of resilience. When we ask questions about the person's perspective, we increase the likelihood of positive relationships. People with high resilience tend to have good relationships and social networks.

Gaining empathy for people who share our values and opinions is easy, the challenge comes when we are faced with people with very different mindsets and values to ourselves.

Developing empathy allows us to resolve conflict effectively and develop a tolerance for others' differing views. It can be very stressful when we take positions over issues and refuse to see any other possibility.



PERCEPTUAL POSITIONS is a simple exercise that helps develop this insight into the motivations of others and thus develop empathy. It is a reframing exercise; by ensuring that someone can look at a situation from **three different perceptual positions**, they can gain insight using **three different perspectives**. From these triple positions, a person can distance themselves from emotionally-charged situations or events.

We first need to identify a number of the three positions/ perspectives to explore the issue.

1st position

First of all, the situation must be seen, heard, and felt by our filters. One's personal experience is key. The more the body feels physically and emotionally, the clearer the 1st position feels. Within NLP, this is called the 'fully-associated position'; someone experiences the situation again and sees everything crystal clear in front of them. It's like traveling back in time and so requires great concentration. It provides interesting insights.

2nd position

In the 2nd position, it is the intention that someone sees, hears, and feels the same situation as in the 1st position through the other person's filters. This position can be in direct communication with the 1st position. This position is associated with impressionists: salespeople, therapists, and coaches can empathize with one another and see the world through the other's eyes.

3rd position

The final idea is to see, hear, and feel the situation through an observer's filters, the so-called 'fly on the wall', who watches without judgment. In this objective perceptual position, it is as if one were watching the situation unfold on the silver screen. From this 3rd position, someone poses as an interested but not directly involved observer. A possible emotional charge is omitted. The bigger picture can be viewed in a single glance. This person is the 'friendly visitor from space'. In this way, this 3rd position is suitable for one assuming the role of 'own coach'.



Oftentimes the third position is found to be the most useful one. This involves stepping into the role of the observer which can be done from several levels;

- **Meta Position or Witness Consciousness** – watching yourself and observing yourself and others in a detached or dissociated way.
- **Bystander** – observing as if you were an uninvolved person witnessing the situation.
- **Universal** – going as big picture as possible and noticing all the other factors that may not have been obvious up close.

The above views allow us to dissociate from our position enough to truly step into the other person's shoes and consider their perspective.

.When we have empathy for others, we improve our communication and our ability to influence others. We are more likely to resolve differences and manage difficult situations successfully. All of this will lower the levels of stress we will experience and thus increase our resilience.

So, the first step is becoming **Mindful of Our Need for Empathy**, noticing when we are failing to explore another's perspective, and then taking action to gain that empathy.

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THE EMPATHY TRAP

THE FEAR NOT



LOOKS LIKE
IT WON'T BE THAT BAD. EVERYTHING'S
GOING TO WORK OUT OK.

TRY INSTEAD
I CAN SEE YOU'RE CONCERNED.
WHAT'S GOING ON?

THE BIG UP



LOOKS LIKE
YOU'RE BETTER THAN HER.

TRY INSTEAD
DOES SHE FRUSTRATE YOU?

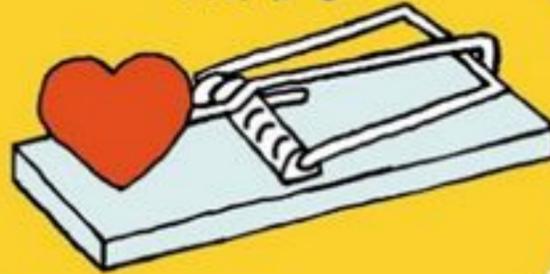
MR FIX IT



LOOKS LIKE
COME ON, BUCK
UP! HOW CAN WE
FIX THIS?

TRY INSTEAD
WHAT HAPPENED?
WHERE ARE YOU AT
ABOUT THIS?

EMPATHY
TRAPS



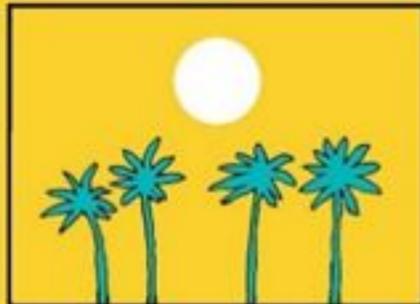
THE FLAT LINE



LOOKS LIKE
YOU'RE FINE.
BE STRONG.
DON'T LET IT
BOTHER YOU.

TRY INSTEAD
YOU LOOK UPSET.

THE CALIFORNIAN



LOOKS LIKE
YOU'RE AMZEBALLS, THE MOST
INCREDIBLE PERSON I KNOW.

TRY INSTEAD
I KNOW YOU THINK YOU SUCK
RIGHT NOW. TELL ME MORE
ABOUT THAT.

THE BALANCE



LOOKS LIKE
COME ON, THINK OF ALL THOSE
PEOPLE STARVING IN THE WORLD.

TRY INSTEAD
TELL ME HOW YOU
FEEL ABOUT THIS.

It is normal and necessary to be tuned in to someone else's feelings, especially when one is very close to that person. Giving—and getting—empathy is essential in intimate adult relationships. “The empathic understanding of the experience of other human beings is as basic an endowment of man as his vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell,” observed noted psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut. The desire to be heard, known and felt deeply never disappears. **But when empathy becomes the default way of relating, psychological well-being is impoverished.**

So if you prioritize other **people's feelings over your own... You might be falling into the "Empathy Trap."**

While sympathy is the act of feeling for someone (“I am so sorry you are hurting”), empathy involves feeling for someone (“I feel your disappointment”). It also differs from compassion, which is a caring concern for another's suffering from a slightly greater distance and often includes a desire to help. **Empathy involves not just feelings but thoughts, and it encompasses two people—the person we are feeling for and ourselves.**



To put ourselves in someone else's shoes, we must strike a balance between emotion and thought and between self and others. Otherwise, empathy becomes a trap, and we can feel as if we're being held hostage by the feelings of others. **The art of empathy requires paying attention to another's needs without sacrificing one's own.** It demands mental dexterity to switch attention from other to self. What turns empathy into a true high-wire act is that its beneficiaries find the attention deeply rewarding. That puts the onus on us to know when to extract ourselves from someone else's shoes—and how.

Recognizing and sharing someone else's emotional state is a complex inner experience. It calls on self-awareness, the ability to distinguish between your feelings and those of others, the skill to take another's perspective, the ability to recognize emotions in others as well as oneself, and the know-how to regulate those feelings.

Overly empathic people may even lose the ability to know what they want or need. They may have a diminished ability to make decisions in their own best interest, experience physical and psychological exhaustion from deflecting their feelings, and may lack internal resources to give their best to key people in their life. What's more, unending empathy creates vulnerability to gaslighting, in which another person negates your reality to assert his or her. For example, when you express your dismay to your friend about being excluded from her last few get-togethers, and she replies, "Oh, you're just being too sensitive."

Those who regularly prioritize the feelings of others above their own needs often experience generalized anxiety or mild depression. They may describe a feeling of emptiness or alienation, or dwell incessantly on situations from the perspective of another. But what causes us to fall into an empathy trap—and how can we escape?

Trapped to balanced

How can you identify if you are at risk of being trapped by empathy? If the answer is yes to any of the following questions, it is an indication that you have fallen into an emotional trap.

1. Do you spend more time thinking about your partner's feelings than about your own?
2. Do you focus your attention on what the other person is saying during an argument, to the exclusion of what you want to say?
3. Do you often get so caught up in the feelings of someone you love when they are depressed or hurting that the feelings seem to become your own?
4. After leaving an argument, are you preoccupied with what the other person was thinking?
5. Do you spend more time trying to figure out why someone let you down than deciding whether his or her reasons outweighed your feelings?



Reining in over-empathy requires emotional intelligence; its underlying skill is self-awareness. You need always to be prepared to explore and meet your own needs. Since you're not used to thinking about them, you might not even be fully aware of what those needs are. Whenever your empathy is aroused, regard it as a signal to turn a spotlight on your feelings. Pause (taking a deep breath helps) to check in with yourself: What am I feeling right now? What do I need now?

Once you know what you need, you can make a conscious decision about how much to give to another and how much to request for yourself. It helps to nurture relationships with people who are mindful of the needs of others.

Taking action on your needs calls on the skill of self-management. Once you start noticing how you become absorbed by other people's intense feelings, especially their negative ones, you can create some distance—even insulate yourself if necessary

For instance, To help manage the mixed feelings that a surge of empathy may create, you can change the way you communicate. Suppose your colleague comes is irritated with his boss and wants to talk to you. You feel too depleted to listen to a rant or make him feel better. Clearly state that you cannot meet his expectations at the moment: “You know, I'd like to talk to you about this, but not today. I have completely wiped out myself. Can we find time tomorrow?”