

Empathy: The Key To Your Spouse' Heart

Holley Counseling | Lexington, KY 40502 | (859) 948-5025

Holley@HolleyCounseling.com

Directions: Couples, please read this out loud together if possible, then slowly work through the discussion questions and write some of your answers if you wish. Then bring this back to your next counseling session. It is best if you have each other's undivided attention when you won't be interrupted and you have a good chunk of time to spend on it. Have fun!

Empathy is the key that opens doors to hearts and makes meaningful, healthy, intimate and satisfying relationships possible. Empathy is a very simple concept, but often difficult to learn. It is difficult to learn because it is the opposite of being focused on ourselves. As humans we are naturally focused on ourselves, even when we are not being intentionally selfish. But empathy requires us to forget ourselves and look at life through the experience of the other person. Empathy comes from the compound Greek word "empathia." "Em" means together or with. "Pathia" means passion; to feel or to suffer. Putting the two together, empathy means to "feel with" or to "suffer with". In order to feel with someone else and to enter into their experience, we have to leave behind our self and our own agendas. The concept of empathy is very similar to the idea behind the golden rule. By extending empathy to someone, we are giving to others what we really want for ourselves. And what we want for ourselves is to be understood and accepted as we are without being judged. In order to further define empathy, we will look at what empathy is not:

Empathy is not...

First, empathy is not the effort to help others. This may sound strange to our ears. There is certainly a place for helping others who cannot help themselves. But this is not what empathy is all about. Empathy is about joining them, not helping them.

Empathy is not feeling sorry for someone. You may feel bad about what someone is going through. This is sympathy, and is a great quality. But feeling sorry for someone is not empathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone. Empathy is feeling with someone.

Empathy is not trying to fix their problem. It may be a nice gesture to try to help someone to solve their problem. But if they have not asked you to help them solve it, this is not your role. And even if you do help them fix their problem, it is not the same as empathy. When someone tells you about a problem they are having, the most natural thing for us to do is to help them fix it. But we must resist this. It is their responsibility to live their lives not ours. And if we fix their problem, we are taking away their self-respect and independence, and are encouraging them to be dependent on other people. Certainly there is a place for helping people with things they cannot

do, or giving others knowledge they do not possess. But they must request it; we must not force our agenda on them. It is not our role as a listener to give people advice, unless of course, they ask for it.

Discuss with your partner the need for your partner to just be a listener vs. being a fixer. In what ways is this an issue in your relationship?

Empathy is not the effort to make others feel better. Of course we want people to be happy. But we can't make people happy. Happiness is something everyone must find for themselves. And by trying to make them happy, we may not be giving them what they need. If we are going to try to make them happy, what exactly will we do to accomplish this? No one knows what the other person needs in a particular moment. If we try to make them happy, we will have to leave the place of being an empathetic listener and place ourselves in the role of a fixer.

Discuss the temptation to soothe or appease rather than empathize with your partner. In what ways is this manifested in your relationship if at all?

Empathy is.....

Empathy is so simple it is difficult. It is simply joining others where they are. That's all. But since our natural tendency is to look at things and interpret things from our own perspective, it takes a lot of concentration and hard work to completely leave behind our own perspective and try to experience life through someone else's perspective. To be empathetic means you have a genuine interest in the well-being of the other person in the same way you are interested in your own well-being.

Unconditional acceptance. Empathy requires unconditional acceptance on our part. When we empathize, we are not saying we agree with the other person's thoughts or actions. In fact you may not like the person you are interacting with at all. Your values and ideas may be completely different from the other person. But none of this necessarily keeps us from being empathetic. In

order to show empathy, we don't have to agree, we just have to accept them and listen to them. We are accepting them just as they are with all their faults and strengths.

You may feel the urge to tell them your opinion due to your concern that they may think you condone their way of thinking or acting. But this is not our job. If they ask us what we think, then they have invited us to participate. We state our thoughts and leave it at that. We should not try to tell them how to live their life any more than you want someone to tell you how to live your life. There are instances in which you will have a mentoring relationship with a person in which they will want your input and you will give it to them, but only if it is wanted and asked for. Sometimes close friendships and marital relationships take on this character. But we must be certain that our input is wanted before we start giving advice.

Many times couples will argue when they hear their partner say something incorrect. Rather than listen, they will interrupt and argue about facts, and the partner never gets around to empathizing. And the speaking partner never gets fully heard or understood. In what ways does this happen in your relationship?

True empathy involves listening and accepting your partner's words and their experience even if it is all based on falsehood. You don't have to agree with them to accept their perspective. You can always clarify the facts later after you have listened thoroughly. Discuss what it would take in your relationship for both of you to empathize with each other without trying to correct them or dispute the "facts" or defend yourself even if you are in the right? Remember, empathy means withholding judgment, and defense and accepting your partner as they are.

Nonjudgmental. Closely related to unconditional acceptance is the quality of being nonjudgmental. Once we understand that it is not our job to change people, it is easier to be nonjudgmental. Also, when we are honest with ourselves and admit that we have faults and weaknesses or unhealthy attitudes of our own, we might be less likely to judge someone for having problems we don't have. You have not walked in their shoes, so you have no idea what kind of life they have endured.

Some psychologists have said that all of us are capable of doing the greatest good to the worst kind of evil, depending upon the circumstances. Other than true psychopaths, when most of us do something bad, we have a hard time believing we would have done something so bad. And yet, for a moment at least, we did something we don't like. And we are disappointed with ourselves for having done something so hurtful to someone else. If we can be compassionate toward our own weaknesses, we have the capacity to be compassionate or empathetic toward others as well. If we can accept our own weaknesses, we can accept other people who are very unlike us. People who are judgmental are people who don't know themselves very well or are not willing to admit their own problems. But empathetic people are often people who see and admit their own frailties so well that they cannot bring themselves to judge other people, even people who have done much worse things.

Discuss how well you two do when it comes to accepting the other person with grace vs. drawing conclusions and making assumptions or judging the other person?

Reflective listening. Empathy involves reflective listening. Empathy is the action of attempting to feel with someone what they are feeling. In addition to feeling what others feel, empathy is also the attempt to understand what other people are thinking and saying. Reflective listening is almost being like a mirror. You are saying back to the other person what you understand they are feeling, thinking and saying. Of course, you don't want to be exactly like a mirror or a parrot and merely echo their exact words. You will want to be genuine and put it in your own words. For example, let's say your friend says to you, "I am so angry with Mary right now I feel like getting a divorce". Rather than echo his exact words, reflect back to him the feeling and content of what he is saying using your own words. You might respond, "It sounds like you're really fed up; so fed up that your thinking about ending your relationship with Mary."

Give yourself and your partner a score on a scale of 1-10 on how well they empathize and listen and do reflective listening before sharing their perspective. 1 = very little or no reflective listening, 10 = always listening reflectively and empathetically.

Body language. According to Alton Barbour, in his 1976 book, *Louder than Words*, 7 percent of our communication is verbal, 38 percent is vocal (the sound, pitch and volume of our voice) and a whopping 55 percent is non-verbal. That's right, an astounding 55% of communication is mediated through our body; through facial expression, body posture, use of hands, eyes and other body movements and positions. In order to be truly empathetic, we need to connect with the other person with our eyes, our body posture, voice and our words. It is not difficult to detect whether someone is truly interested in what you are saying. All you have to do is watch their body. If the person you are talking with does not look at you, but let's their eyes wander to what is going on elsewhere in the room, or their body is positioned away from you or their arms are folded, it's a good bet they are not really connecting with you. Their mind is elsewhere. So, when you are attempting to extend empathy with someone, pay attention to what your body is communicating, not just your words. Even though you may be saying the right words, your body may be saying something else.

Empowerment and respect. Empathy provides the person a mirror to look at themselves and their own life so they can work through their trials. It also gives them unconditional acceptance which helps them feel accepted and valuable. This helps to give them courage to face their difficulties. If on the other hand, we fail to listen empathetically or if we ignore them or just try to fix their problem, we are sending them the message that they are unimportant, weak, and incapable of fixing their own problem. Empathy puts the power and courage in their hands so they can be empowered to choose how to make choices for themselves. In addition to this, empathy helps create a bond between two people. The person will likely feel accepted by you and will feel close to you because you truly understand them and accept them without judgment. Many times they will eventually start to adopt some of your values and your way of life because they respect and admire your loving nature. This is the direct opposite of using power and control. The tendency in human nature is to use some form of power, influence or control to get people to change. But this is ineffective and disrespectful. Empathy, on the other hand, has the ability to help people change, but not as a result of being forced. Rather they want to change because they are inspired by what they see in you. Therefore, the use of power and control is actually quite weak and ineffective. But the use of love and empathy is an extremely empowering, inspiring force. Don't tell them you know how they feel, because you don't. Even though you may have experienced something identical, their experience is unique. It is better to ask how they are feeling rather than impose your feelings onto them.

Do you agree that being empathetic vs. being a fixer demonstrates respect and is empowering? If not, please explain and discuss this with your partner. In what ways could this improve in your marriage?

Advanced Empathy – accepting people’s past and inherited weaknesses

It takes advanced empathy to try to understand how someone may have negative habits which probably come from their own negative childhood. We all have automatic emotional programs that make us prone to react in ways that hinder relationship growth. Many of these automatic responses grow out of childhood and are “hardwired” into us and take time to improve. It is important that each partner be patient with each other with these, trying not to take them personal. For instance, what about the wife who was abused and neglected during childhood and seems to be “cold as a fish” and not interested in affection. Rather than take this personally, accept it, empathize with her. It is the only way she knew how to protect herself in the past. Don’t penalize her for doing what comes natural. It will take time, acceptance, empathy and work to help her feel safe and give her time to open up to you. We all have our baggage from the past which we don’t like. We hate it that our defenses go up when they do. And we hate it that it hinders our relationships.

Two sets of baggage

Unfortunately, all of us have baggage we bring to our marriages and relationships. Due to a lifetime of responses to conflict, we have developed habits to protect ourselves. These habits, often called defensive mechanisms, may have kept us safe in childhood, but in relationships they get in the way. They are the enemies of intimacy, trust and love. Even though we may dislike it when we get defensive, shut down, get loud, withdraw, or feel the tug to please everyone just to stop the conflict. These are automatic emotional programs that drive our behaviors which we have inherited from our childhood. Understanding these emotional programs will help us be more patient with each other by learning to accept that some of these reactions are not intended to be mean-spirited, but emerge from some hurt from the past. There are three things we can all do to work through these:

- 1 When you have acted in a way that was hurtful, gather up the courage to apologize for it.
2. Accept his or her automatic emotional programs, knowing they are not personal, but inherited from the past.
3. Determine to conquer the automatic emotional programs by growing in trust and love. Now, if a person is not willing to improve on the automatic emotional programs, we will have little hope of growing in the relationship. Accepting the weakness is important, but when someone is not willing to grow through them, the relationship is stunted and will be hurtful to the other partner. It should not be expected that you or your partner would build one’s life around each other’s problems and tiptoe around your or their failure to grow.

Imagine this: Let’s suppose two puppies were born from the same mother. One of them was taken into a home where there was lots of love, tenderness and care. Let’s say the other one was taken by someone who put them in a pen outside and, every time the owner visited the dog, he would beat it with a stick and yell at it. He only fed it a couple times a week and rarely changed the dirty drinking water, and certainly did not pet the puppy. So, now the puppy has learned

quickly that people are not safe. Whenever he sees the shadow of a human coming to his pen, he runs to the back of the pen with tail tucked and whimpering, afraid. Or if he is the aggressive type, he will growl at and try to bite everyone who comes near him to protect himself. Even if a new person who is full of love and kindness comes to visit the puppy, he will be afraid, because that is all he knows is fear. To protect himself he will run and hide or fight and bite. But the first puppy has learned that people are safe. In fact, this puppy knows nothing of fear. People are fun and loving. When he sees a person drive up in the driveway, he wags his tail and runs to the window to see who will be the next fun person to pet him.

We are social beings and made for love and relationships. And when we do not get love we naturally develop strong defensive mechanisms to protect ourselves against pain and from the fear of not being validated, accepted and loved.

As a newborn, the human infant is the most vulnerable creature on the planet. God has made us so that we can survive only when we are cared for by another person. And when this care is stunted we are stunted. The first part of a human's brain to develop is the limbic system. It is the primitive self-protective part of the brain that only knows survival: to gain pleasure and security and avoid pain or insecurity. This is otherwise known as the fight or flight system of the brain. The frontal lobe, on the other hand, is where the prefrontal cortex is located. This is the part of the brain dedicated to reasoning, discernment, decision-making and even evaluating one's own thoughts and behaviors and making a decision how to act, choosing from an array of options. The problem is that this part of the brain does not begin to function this way until adolescence. Even then, it is just beginning to develop. Scientists seem to suggest that the prefrontal cortex does not fully develop until the mid twenties. Maybe this is why car insurance rates go down at age 25!!!! Coincidence? I don't think so.

When we are children, before our frontal lobe develops, our responses to conflict are recorded in our limbic system of our brain which is then hard-wired to the rest of our body and emotions. In layman's terms, this means we have knee-jerk reactions to conflict which we may not like. Our reactions do not go through the rational part of our brain where we can use reason and discernment to make a choice about how to respond. No, the child merely reacts in a primitive defensive fashion to protect the self. No matter how perfect our environment is or how perfect our parents are, no child's world is free from fearful or threatening events or messages. So, all of us develop defensive responses and carry them into adulthood when we must learn to undo them. The more traumatic the childhood, the more severe the defensive mechanisms are. With some children the defensive responses are so strong that, even when their rational brain develops, the fight or flight response is so strong that he or she still reacts out of this primitive self-protective response because the foundation for these behaviors are so deep. They can only be rewired by teaching the rational brain new ways of processing information, relationship interaction and conflict. But this is usually a long process of growth.

In what ways can you empathize with your partners weaknesses and inherited baggage from childhood (which we all have to some degree), and be patient with their growth?

So when your partner reacts in ways that seem hurtful, remember that they are probably acting out of a lifetime of experiences they did not have a lot of control over. This, of course, does not excuse them from growing, but it is something we can accept and empathize with as we are supportive and help them grow through their pain as they help us grow through our own. In order to practice using empathy, read the statements below and try to respond with empathy.

The statements are spoken to you. How will you respond with empathy?

1. "I hate your guts. You have made me so angry, I could bite nails."
2. "I have had a difficult day. My computer kept messing up. I spent three hours trying to create one simple document."
3. "Hey, guess what? I made all A's on my report card!!"
4. "I just found out that my father died. It was so unexpected. We didn't even know he had heart problems."
5. (with anger and hurt, your wife says.....) "I feel like you don't care about me. I have asked you so many times to replace the light bulbs and to cut the grass. You haven't done either of them. You hardly even talk to me anymore or show me any affection. "
6. (Sobbing uncontrollably, your wife says...) – "I hate my job. My boss is so demanding and I don't have enough time in the day to accomplish my work. And when I do my work, I feel like he doesn't appreciate me."
7. (your boss says to you....) "You never do what I ask you. And when you finally do complete a task, you only do the bare minimum asked of you."
8. "I have looked all over the place for a job, but no one is hiring."
9. "My life is a total mess. I have gone to church all my life and God has not helped me one bit. I'm starting to think there is no God".
10. "I am so behind on my bills, I don't know how I'm going to catch up".

11. “You burned the hamburgers, what a waste of money.”
12. “I had the most unbelievable day. I just paid off my home. I got a raise today, and I have met this great girl who really seems to like me.”
13. Speaking about someone you love and respect, a friend says to you... “I hate that son of a bitch. He only thinks of himself”.
14. “I’m tired of life. I just don’t think life is worth living any more.”