



Dawson Psychological Services

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The Art and Act of Developing Empathy

Empathy, sometimes called “active listening”, is a way to let your partner know you are listening. It also gives your partner the chance to check out whether you heard them and to feel validated when you have understood or “get” the feelings underneath the words they say. Empathy is best used as a practice or a discipline, so that communication pitfalls like premature interruptions, unnecessary arguing about “what you said” or “what you didn’t say or do”, can be avoided.

Before you begin:

Before describing the steps, here are some important notes which can set the tone for making the exercise more likely to generate quality time for the two of you.

Benefits

The benefits of this exercise for improving communication are potentially unlimited if you apply it to communication in general. However, in the context of the couple relationship, the benefits you can reasonably expect include:

1. Feeling more appreciated, valued, and accepted by your partner;
2. Unsticking “stuck” communication patterns;
3. Learning more from each other’s points of view; and,
4. Decreasing angry or aggressive communication styles.

Preparing for Empathy

To prepare for the empathy exercise, *discuss and agree on the following points with your partner*. If you aren’t really on speaking terms at the moment, it is best to wait until you are both feeling like talking. If you aren’t ready to try this on your own, it’s okay to wait until you are in session with your counsellor. If your counsellor has offered this exercise to you in session and you’ve already had a chance to practice it a few times, I’m sure you’ll do just fine. If you do experience trouble spots that you just couldn’t get through, make a note of these and bring them to your next session.

Build an attitude of curiosity and appreciation

This exercise is best done with an attitude of curiosity and appreciation of whatever your partner’s perspective is, even if it doesn’t happen to agree with your own.

On curiosity, for those of you who may remember the old “Columbo” movies, be prepared to allow for Peter Falk’s famous turnaround. Just as everyone thought he had finished interviewing the suspect, he would turn around and say, “Oh, yes, there was one more thing...” This strategy can catch people off guard (which is why he used it, of course!). But expecting it can reinforce an attitude of curiosity of learning not only about each other, but also about the process of improving relationships.

To cultivate an appreciative attitude, I would invite you to make an agreement with each



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other to avoid name-calling or insults, and to put the exercise on hold if this agreement is broken. Come back to it when both of you can make this agreement.

Minimize distractions

It is much easier to accomplish the exercise when the couple is not distracted by other matters. So, if children, telephone, or TV are distractions, you can either eliminate those distractions or save the exercise for later. A space and time that allows you to focus on the exercise will make it easier to do.

Follow along

It may help to print a couple of copies of this article so that you can follow along together.

Monitor your urge to share your own perspective

The main point of this whole exercise is really **to learn how to put our own perspective on hold while we listen to someone else's, whether we agree with them or not.** In order learn this skill, an important thing you need to practice here while you are listening to your partner talk is to monitor what's happening to your urge to share or interject your own perspective. You must learn to divide your attention between listening and putting your own "stuff" on hold, while not giving in to the urge until you are certain your partner is done talking.

If you experience the urge to interject your own stuff before you've made sure your partner is finished speaking, try pushing through that urge. If you find you can't resist the urge on this topic, choose a less emotional topic or take a break and agree to come back to the exercise at a later time when you have both had a chance to cool down.

Cautions:

Not a magic pill

Although I really believe that empathy is about as close to a "magic pill" for communication problems that you will ever find, empathy cannot stop people from having the feelings they ordinarily feel. However, when empathy is practiced regularly by couples, partners often experience an increase in feelings of "validation". Validation arises with the acknowledgement of what is important to a person. The great thing is that when individuals feel validated or acknowledged for what they think is important, they usually feel better about themselves and they usually feel like they are being valued and even loved.

Extreme Talking

Some people are pretty good at going on and on and never really finishing. It's not unrealistic to expect this to happen once in a while in any couple. So, if this is a problem, what you can do is agree at the beginning that each turn must only take up to the time it takes a 2- minute sand-timer to run out.



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Feels Mechanical

This exercise can feel pretty mechanical at first, but with a bit of practice, it can start to feel fluid pretty quickly, especially if you have a counsellor to help guide you through the trouble spots. Another point about feeling mechanical, almost any new and complex task feels mechanical when we first start learning it, such as driving a car, learning chess, etc. Eventually, with enough practice, that feeling fades and the practice becomes part of us and is done without even thinking about it.

Finding the feeling

Some people literally “parrot” what they have heard their partner say. But this can feel very mechanical and even insulting. This is *not* the idea of this exercise. Instead, it’s more effective to “dig” a bit underneath the words your partner is using to try to identify the feeling they are expressing. Things you might say here are: “Wow, it sounds like you’re feeling really frustrated!” Another article on this topic is available upon request.

Expect a Range of Feelings

During this exercise, it is reasonable to expect the full range of feelings that you typically experience in your relationship with your partner. You may even experience feelings you have not had before because you are probably doing some things differently than you usually do, such as monitoring your own perspective, listening more attentively, and feeling like your partner is really valuing what you think, feel, and say. All of these could be positive changes for you.

It’s not getting better fast enough

Different people have different capacities for listening, paraphrasing, and giving feedback. For some, this can take many years of consistent practice, while others will get it within a few hours. A small minority of individuals can’t seem to get this skill, but they most likely have some kind of mental or brain disorder that prevents the understanding that **other people have thoughts too**. Those with autism commonly have this problem. I have worked with hundreds of couples and, bottom-line, most people do improve with varying amounts of practice. Roadblocks to “getting it” can become a helpful example on which to practice this exercise.

A summary of the Steps to Empathy or Reflective Listening are on the next page...



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The Seven-Steps to Mutual Understanding:

When your partner says they have something to tell you, you can make the choice to:

1. Accept that your partner has something that is important for you to hear, even though it might be different from what you believe to be the situation;
2. **Put your own stuff aside and just listen** until your partner is finished. Dig a bit to identify your partner's feelings and motivations. It's very important to remember here that your own stuff is still "on hold";
3. Watch for pauses and gently query whether your partner is finished;
4. Once your partner says he/she is finished (or the sand-timer runs out), **tell your partner what you think was important in what your partner said**, that is, tell your partner what was underneath what you heard your partner say;
5. **Ask your partner whether you understood**...Allow your partner time to respond;
6. **Accept your partner's feedback either way**...if they say "no, you didn't get it", allow them to explain what you missed...if they say "yes, that's pretty much it, you got it", then go on to step 7;
7. When your partner indicates that you understood them well enough, then it is your turn.

Repeat steps 1 to 7 but switch roles. Practice regularly for at least a ½ hour session each day.