

Mother Nurture

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Empathy: A Key Relationship Skill

My husband and I communicate well enough on the surface, but I feel we are drifting apart deep down. I for one don't feel like he understands me that much any more.

The basis of emotional closeness in a relationship is empathy, the foundation of the experience of “we” rather than just “I” or “you.” If you sense that your partner really feels how it is for you, you feel less stressed, plus closer and more trusting, and more inclined to give empathy to him - and the same is certainly true for him with regard to you.

Fundamentally, empathy is a skill, like any other, and you can get better at it. And much the same, you can ask your partner to get better at it, too! Plus, getting better at empathy will only help a person become a better parent.

Emotional Imagination

Empathy is not agreement or approval. It is simply understanding, the intuitive sensing of another person’s underlying feelings, wants, and psychological dynamics - looking at the world from behind the other’s eyes. “What would I be feeling if I were him or her?”

Empathy is the expression of four basic skills:

- Pay attention
- Inquire
- Dig down
- Double check

Pay Attention

Attention is like a spotlight, illuminating its object - and you can get better at attention in several ways:

- Calm yourself.
- Consciously choose to give your attention over to your partner for a time.
- Just listen, without developing your case against what the other is saying.
- Keep the focus on the other’s experience, rather than on circumstances or beliefs or ideas

Inquire

Empathy is a process of discovery. You study what is under one stone. Then you ask an open-ended question, such as the ones below, that turns over another.

- Can you say more about _____?*
- How was it for you that _____?*
- How do you feel about him/her?*
- What do you mean when you say _____?*
- What's your gut feeling about _____?*
- What do you think about _____?*
- What is really bothering you?*
- What are you concerned they'll do?*
- What was the most upsetting part of all that?*
- What do you wish would have happened instead?*
- How was this like _____ [i.e. some similar thing] for you?*

Dig Down

The personality is layered like a parfait, with softer and younger material at the bottom. The empathic listener:

- Tries to get a sense of the softer feelings - hurt, fear, or shame - that are usually behind anger or a tough facade.
- Imagines the insecure, scared, suffering person behind the other's eyes.
- Wonders how childhood and other experiences could have affected his or her thoughts, feelings, and wants today.
- Considers the underlying, positive wants - e.g., safety, autonomy, feeling valued – the other is seeking to fulfill, although perhaps in ways one doesn't like.
- Inquires gently about the deeper layers - without trying to play therapist. This must be done carefully, usually toward the end of a conversation, without making it seem like the here-and-now elements in what the other is saying are unimportant, especially if they are about you.

Double Check

When we receive a communication, we need to tell the sender, "Message received." Otherwise, he or she will tend to keep broadcasting, ever more powerfully, in an effort to get through. Try questions like these:

- "Let me say back what I hear you saying. Are you saying that _____?"*
- I'm not sure I fully understand this, but is it like _____?*
- Is the key point that _____?*
- Is it correct to say that you felt _____?*
- So one part is _____, another part is _____, and a third part is _____, right?*

The Rewards of Empathy

With a better idea of the feelings and wants of our partner, we are more able to solve problems together. It's like dancing: a couple shines when each person is attuned to the other's mood and rhythms and intentions.

Additionally, when our partner feels understood, he or she is more willing to extend understanding in turn. Once pure survival needs are handled, the deepest question of all in any important relationship is, "Do you understand me?" Until it is answered with a "Yes," that question will keep troubling the waters of any the relationship.

But when understanding is continually refreshed by new empathy, connections are constantly re-knit, strengthening the fabric of the relationship.

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