

Empathy is feeling a feeling along with someone else. You may not have been through the same situation, but you can try to learn about and understand how they may feel and think about how you would feel if the same thing happened to you.

Why is empathy important?

When you take the time to talk with someone about what is happening in their lives and listen to what they have to say, you are helping them feel comfortable sharing their feelings with you. If you do this, you can learn what is helpful for them and respond to their emotions in the most supportive way for each person. This increases your connection with them and ability to support them in a way that meet their needs.

Skills to practice empathy

Stop doing things that might distract so they know you are paying attention – this can be your phone, TV, or other items around you that pull away your focus from the person you are talking to.

- Use body language that supports conversation. This includes keeping arms uncrossed, seating or standing facing them or next to them, and gently nodding your head to help them to continue talking. You can also mirror some of the things the person you are talking to is doing; this is a way to connect with them without having to know the right words to say.
- Make facial expressions: relaxed and attentive, responding to match the conversation –raising or scrunching eyebrows to show you are worried or agree, kind smiles at the right time
- Say kind caring statements (example: That sounds tough; it makes sense you would feel upset) and repeat what they are saying to make sure you understand and let them know that you are listening (example: “So when your teacher told you to go sit down when you wanted to ask for help it made you feel frustrated, right?”)

Examples of non-empathetic responses to mental health struggles

“You’ll be fine.”

“Why can’t you just get over it?”

“You’re always acting so crazy when little stuff happens.”

“I don’t think that’s as big a deal as you’re making it to be.”

Examples of empathy working

“It sounds like things can be really hard for you sometimes, especially when you feel like your friends haven’t noticed. Thanks for telling me.”

“You mentioned sometimes going for a walk helps you calm down when you’re frustrated. Would you like to go for one with me now?”

“When Jordan shared that rumor about you, it really wasn’t nice, and it wasn’t nice of you to do the same in response. I understand you were hurt, and I care about both of you.”

“You said your friendship with him means a lot to you – do you want to see if he will get together with us to talk more about it?”