



# INTEGRATE TO LIVE

Restore Resilience. Cultivate Community. Impact your World

## Week 18 Transcript: Empathy

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Today we are exploring empathy in relationships. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. And, when on the receiving end of empathy, it creates the powerful experience of feeling felt. Feeling felt is one of the most healing and comforting exchanges that let us know that we belong and are not alone in our experiences.

Empathy is a skill, not a natural gift. Some people do have a natural ability to pick up on the emotions of others more easily than the rest of us. But, taking that and then effectively communicating empathy requires additional skills.

Practicing a mindful awareness of this process helps us develop a more strengthened capacity for empathy. The good news is it can be cultivated and we're all better for putting it into practice.

Empathy is the most essential piece of trust and relationship. The higher brain uses what's called resonance, the hard-wired sensory processing of the emotions and actions of others, to create connection.

In Brené Brown's seminal work on human connection, she describes how to practice empathy and the things we do that are barriers to expressing it. I'm sharing her wisdom with you today.

Brown references Theresa Wiseman, a nursing scholar from England, as she defines the four attributes of empathy and some of the barriers to expressing it.

Number One is Perspective Taking: to see the world as another person sees it. In the Pivot to a New Thought video, we identify some of the primary perspectives we see the world through.

Recognizing this allows us to begin to understand that someone else may be seeing through a different lens than we are. From this vantage point, we can get curious about that perspective and come alongside them as we seek to understand what they're experiencing.



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Number Two is Withholding Judgment: to withhold judgment of someone else's experience. This is really hard to do. It's natural for us to make judgments and we typically judge in an area that we are experiencing shame or fear. Finding someone "doing worse" than we are gives us a false sense of safety and protection. Expressing empathy requires us to stay out of judgment and get curious.

Number three is Recognizing Emotions in ourselves and in others: to understand another person's feelings. We learn how to connect with the emotion they are expressing within our own experience.

Often, we'll hear of someone's difficulty and think, "I've never gone through what they're going through, how can I empathize?" This requires digging deep and getting curious about what emotions they are experiencing underneath it all.

Number four is Communication of Understanding: to communicate your understanding of that person's feeling back to the person. It's not about saying the right thing, but communicating that we're with them in the experience.

Because empathy is a skill that we all must learn, it's important to be aware of some of the most common obstacles to empathy that we do, often outside of awareness.

Number One is confusing sympathy with empathy: we tend to think that feeling sorry for someone is the same as feeling with someone. But, there is a world of difference. Sympathy is full of judgment and keeps its distance while empathy joins the person while seeking understanding and connection.

Number two is sympathy seeking: this happens when people don't actually want you to empathize with them, they just want you to feel sorry for them. Instead of reaching out to experience not being alone, they are looking for validation of uniqueness, and that no one will understand them, and then being mad at the world for not getting it.



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Number three is “Stacking the deck”: this is the game of one-upmanship. Someone shares with us a really difficult circumstance in their life, and we respond by saying, “You think you’ve got it bad; here’s what happened to me...”

Number four is Failing to “dig deep”: Thinking we can’t relate to someone’s experience because we’ve not gone through it ourselves. As we learn to recognize emotions, we can always find a way to empathize with another person’s emotional experience even though we can’t identify with the actual experience.

Number five is thinking that shame is a good way to control someone’s behavior: there is no “healthy shame.” It is always destructive to someone’s identity and sense of belonging.

Number six is what’s called the “Just World Theory”. This is the belief and worldview that we live in a just and fair world and you get what you put out. That “bad things happen to bad people” and “good things happen to good people”.

We want to believe that our car seats, good nutrition, and right choices will protect us from bad things happening. This is a barrier to empathy because we’re afraid to let down this belief that we self-protect with and touch our fear that in spite of all of our good intentions, bad things could happen to us, too.

Number seven is Comparative Suffering: believing what we’re going through is not as difficult as someone else’s struggle. Or believing the opposite: our experience is worse than everyone else’s and no one could possibly understand. From either place, our empathy inherently has judgment and ranking in it and blocks us from authentic connection.

When I was first learning and developing my skill of empathy, it was really helpful for me to remember to focus on what emotions they might be experiencing instead of what clever word of wisdom I could say in response.



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As I got curious, and listened for the emotions, I practiced saying something like this: “I don’t know what it’s like to go through what you are going through (fill in the blank), but I do know what it’s like to experience loss or disappointment or life not going the way I’d hoped and dreamed (fill in the blank with the emotion they are experiencing that you can relate to in your own life experience).”

All of us have experienced rage, powerlessness, grief and fear. People don’t want you to fix it. They want to know they’re not alone in it or rejected because of it. They want to feel felt.

There’s a lot to take in around this essentially important aspect of connection. Pay attention this week as you are in conversation with others and put these new skills into practice. Be sure to download the action guide to support this process and share what you are learning on our group page.