

The Importance of Empathy (* Essential "Soft Skill" for Physicians)

Julie Fuimano, RN, MBA, CSAC, a certified coach, writer, and motivational speaker

Empathy can be a pretty fuzzy concept. In fact, most people who score high on assessments in the area of empathy often have no idea what they do; they just know that they like people, they enjoy working with and helping people and they value people as individuals.

In a recent presentation to healthcare professionals on empathy in New York City, the audience concurred that healthcare professionals do exhibit empathy most of the time - to their patients. When asked about the use of empathy with colleagues or with family - or even with themselves - the audience seemed pretty certain they could do a better job.

What Is Empathy?

Empathy is the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another person. The positive psychology definition is: The quality of feeling and understanding another person's situation in the present moment — their perspectives, emotions, actions (reactions) — and communicating this to the person. So you know what they are feeling, or at least you suspect you know what they are experiencing, and you communicate that to elicit further discussion or clarification.

Empathy is an Emotional Intelligence (EI) competency. In the field of Emotional Intelligence, there are four clusters of competencies and eighteen competencies. The four clusters are:

1. Self-Awareness
2. Self-Management
3. Social Awareness
4. Relationship Management

Empathy falls under Social Awareness. This skill reflects a person's ability to connect with others and to relate to them which is an essential skill in building and managing healthy relationships. Without the ability to understand what another is going through, our relationships remain superficial and without the depth and richness that occurs when we share an emotional connection. Opportunity is lost.

Why Is Empathy Important?

Without empathy, people tend to go about life without considering how other people feel or what they may be thinking. Each of us has differing perspectives. We all experience moods, pain and hurt, joy and sadness. And we are so limited when we only see our own perspective. Without taking a moment to assess another, it is easy to make assumptions and jump to conclusions. This often leads to misunderstandings, bad feelings, conflict, poor morale and even divorce. People do not feel heard or understood.

A client reported that a recent radio program surveyed its listeners on how they knew they were loved and they responded that they knew they were loved when they felt heard. In surveys with employees on what makes a good manager, people want to feel like their manager listens to them. This is a huge issue. When leaders and parents and teachers listen, really listen, using empathy to understand what the person is thinking or feeling without trying to change them or fix them or solve their problem, the person feels valued as a human being. And when people feel valued, they feel safe. They feel that they matter. And this means they are free to be themselves and to perform their work. In other words, employees are more productive when they feel valued.

The Power of Empathy

When you use empathy to understand why someone is angry or when a child is acting out, for instance, you might learn that something happened at home that is upsetting them for instance, their mother is ill, or the child has no food at home to eat and is hungry. Instead of reacting to the emotions of another or becoming defensive, you can ask questions about their behavior or emotional state. There still may need to be discipline or consequences to their behavior, but by using empathy first, the person feels valued and heard and therefore, will more easily accept responsibility for their actions.

Empathy is the missing link in families, in our schools, and in our workplaces. As we grow up, kids can often be mean to each other. If we start teaching empathy in grade school and middle school, then perhaps we would grow up being more loving and tolerant and understanding of each other.

Challenges to Empathy

What does it take to be more empathetic? Why don't we do it more often?

1. For one thing, **it requires we pay attention**. Too often we are in our own heads; we have our own agenda. We are busy. So we don't pay attention to what others are thinking or feeling. In order to improve, we need to be more self-aware and more aware of others. For example, the next time you ask someone how they are doing, listen to their response. Do you believe them? Are they really okay? Ask yourself if you care to learn more. If so, then ask them a question or share your observation.

2. **It takes time**. In our fast paced world, people just keep moving. Empathy requires that we stop and take the time to care. "What is going on for you; you look like you have something on your mind?"

3. **Your self-esteem gets in the way**. When your mind is so busy with negative thoughts about you, then you don't have the space to really be present for another person. Often people think they are empathetic but when you consider what are you thinking about when you are listening to the person, you may find that you are busy thinking about you – how the person thinks about you, if they like you, that you should be doing something else, or you're not going to be able to help them...blah, blah, blah.

4. **There is history between you that you carry as baggage**. The longer you know a person, the more history you have with them, the harder it is to put that aside and simply be with them. You have developed a preconditioned response which you will need to be aware of and stop in order to truly open the connection with this person. Look at them with new eyes. Leave your baggage at the door. Tell a new story about your relationship. This one is not easy.

Empathy is a choice. We have to choose to improve, to care, to get out of our own way, and to bridge the gaps between us – generations, cultures, religions, socioeconomics, etc. Empathy allows us to be fully human and gives others permission to do the same.