

Mental Health & Happiness Series

Be Kind to Your Mind, Body and Community

Activities to Boost Empathy

- Practice with the Active Listening Guidelines
- Become aware of the Empathy Busters

Active Listening Guide

Engage in a conversation using the Active Listening Guidelines

1. **Paraphrase.** Once the other person has finished expressing a thought, paraphrase what he or she said to make sure you understand and to show that you are paying attention. Helpful ways to paraphrase include "What I hear you saying is...", "It sounds like...", and "If I understand you right..."
2. **Ask questions.** When appropriate, ask questions to encourage the other person to elaborate on his or her thoughts and feelings. Avoid jumping to conclusions about what the other person means. Instead, ask questions to clarify his or her meaning, such as, "When you say____, do you mean____?"
3. **Express empathy.** If the other person voices negative feelings, strive to validate these feelings rather than questioning or defending against them. For example, if the speaker expresses frustration, try to consider why he or she feels that way, regardless of whether you think that feeling is justified or whether you would feel that way yourself were you in his or her position. You might respond, "I can sense that you're feeling frustrated," and even "I can understand how that situation could cause frustration."
4. **Use engaged body language.** Show that you are engaged and interested by making eye contact, nodding, facing the other person, and maintaining an open and relaxed body posture. Avoid attending to distractions in your environment or checking your phone. Be mindful of your facial expressions: Avoid expressions that might communicate disapproval or disgust.

5. **Avoid judgment.** Your goal is to understand the other person's perspective and accept it for what it is, even if you disagree with it. Try not to interrupt with counter-arguments or mentally prepare a rebuttal while the other person is speaking.
6. **Avoid giving advice.** Problem-solving is likely to be more effective after both conversation partners understand one another's perspective and feel heard. Moving too quickly into advice-giving can be counterproductive.
7. **Take turns.** After the other person has had a chance to speak and you have engaged in the active listening steps above, ask if it's okay for you to share your perspective. When sharing your perspective, express yourself as clearly as possible using "I" statements (e.g., "I feel overwhelmed when you don't help out around the house"). It may also be helpful, when relevant, to express empathy for the other person's perspective (e.g., "I know you've been very busy lately and don't mean to leave me hanging...").

Become Aware of the Empathy Busters

Become aware of how Empathy Busters impact a conversation. Invite a friend to have a conversation with you to practice empathy skill building. Share a short story of a situation or event when you became upset. Share with someone and notice how it feels to receive appropriate empathy or empathy busters.

Empathy Busters:

- **Solving the problem**
 - Examples: "I'll fix it." "I'll talk to her." "I'll get you a new one."
 - Many people make this mistake when trying to comfort a friend. It's common to think everything would be fine if we could just solve the problem! Problem solving is a useful skill, but the timing must be right. What is helpful initially when another person is upset is simply expressing empathy, validating the other person's feelings, and inviting him or her to talk about his or her feelings. Rushing to solve the other person's problems often makes the person feel as if his or her feelings are being dismissed or invalidated.
- **Unsolicited advice**
 - Examples: "Well, if I were you...." "I think you should...." "Why don't you just...?"
 - Again, offering advice right off the bat is not usually helpful or welcomed by a friend who is hurting. Instead, wait for advice to be sought. In the meantime, express empathy and actively listen. Just be there.
- **Dismissing feelings**
 - Examples: "It's not that big a deal." "You shouldn't feel that way." "Get over it." "That's no reason to be upset." "At least,...."
 - This response makes it seem as though the person is wrong for feeling a certain way. Feelings aren't right or wrong—they just are.

- **Sarcasm**

- Examples: "That's just such a tragedy!" "Oh, it's just the end of the world..." "Boo hoo, what a shame."
- Sarcasm will make an upset friend feel put down and/or misunderstood.

Source: adapted from "Transforming Behavior: Training Parents and Kids Together" by Mary Cook
<https://blog.brookespublishing.com/5-activities-for-building-empathy-in-your-students/>