

Mental Health & Happiness

Be Kind to Your Mind, Body and Community

Boost Empathy: Support Connection and Shift Perspective

Learning Objectives

- Explore types of empathy
- Learn about empathy “boosters” and “busters”
- Practice active listening and perspective taking

Lesson Key Points

- **Empathy definition:** the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
- **Three types of empathy and its influence on mental health**
 - **Cognitive:** see their view, the ability to understand another person’s perspective.
 - **Emotional:** feel what they feel, the ability to resonate with what someone else is feeling.
 - **Empathic Concern:** ready to act and help, the ability to sense what another person needs.
- **Maintain your own boundaries to avoid burnout or empathy fatigue**
 - Empathic Distress: With emotional empathy – feeling other’s pain as your own pain – this will activate the pain centers in the brain causing empathic distress, burnout and fatigue.
 - Empathic Concern: By having compassion and the motivation to help, you activate the reward-centers in the brain, which is better for your mental health and well-being. (Jamil Zaki, Ph.D.)
 - Be mindful, take a moment to breathe. Breathe in “how am I feeling” and breathe out “What do I need.” It’s ok to take time for yourself and ask to have the conversation later.
 - There might be a situation where you feel contempt or disgust. Empathy is not about understanding, agreeing with or accepting someone.
 - Shift your perspective: Look to common humanity and try a loving-kindness practice to extend empathic concern with the message of “may you be happy, healthy, safe and live with ease.”
- **Empathy is a developed skill and building an awareness of your communication habits can help to improve your relationships and personal well-being**
 - Practice using and customizing a set of active listening guidelines.
 - Build an awareness of empathy boosters and busters in your conversations.

Active Listening Guidelines

- Focus on the connection, not the solution
- Be curious, open and present
- Be respectful
- No fixing or judging
- Engaged body language and attention
- Be mindful of your needs too

Empathy Boosters

- Curiosity
- Focus on the connection
- Be open, be present, ask how they feel
- Paraphrase and check in
- Engaged body language
- Express understanding with your responses

Examples to try:

- "If I understand you right..."
- "I can sense you're feeling ____."
- "I can understand how that situation can cause ____."

Empathy Busters

- Solving the problem
- Unsolicited advice
- Dismissing feelings
- Sarcasm
- Planning your response while listening
- Distractions

Examples to avoid:

- "I'll fix it."
- "Why don't you just..."
- "At least..."
- "It's not a big deal."
- "Boo hoo."

Resources

Beach Cities Health District:

- [Mental Health & Happiness Series](#)
- [Virtual Events](#)
- [Health-Related Resources & Referrals](#)

Books:

- "Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High" by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler, MD
- "Emotional Intelligence" by Daniel Goleman
- "The Empathy Effect" by Helen Riess, MD
- "The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World" by Jamil Zaki, Ph.D.

Websites:

- [Action for Happiness](#)
- [Greater Good in Action](#)
- [Happify.com](#)
- [Mindful.org](#)

Articles:

- ["What is empathy?"](#)
- [Infographic from Happify on "Experiencing Burnout? Here's How to Recover"](#)
- ["Six Habits of Highly Empathic People"](#)
- [Greater Good Science Center Empathy Quiz](#)
- ["What the Brains of Selfless People Teach Us About Empathy"](#)