



Healthy Habit #3: Cultivate Empathy Practice

Most of us assume empathy to mean listening to others with a kind and compassionate heart. Yet when it comes to forming long-term relationships that can flourish over time, empathy refers more to your capacity to generate a sense of being “in something together” with another person. Where you are being with someone with such attentiveness and presence that the other person feels close and connected to you.

So rather than empathy being about your own experience of compassion for someone, it’s more about your ability to activate a dynamic field of connection and belonging between yourself and another person, simply by the way you are leaning in and listening to discover who they are, and what is happening in their inner world.

“The Four A’s of Empathy” are the core practices that support the development of this relational experience of being “in something together.”

They are:

1. **Attentiveness:** Attentiveness is the practice of paying close attention to others to discover more about who someone is, what their life context is, what their needs and desires are, as well as their unique goals, history and perspectives. It is the recognition that others are different than you--that their needs, likes, desires and wants may be very different than your own and worthy of deep attention. When you give your full attention to someone in this way, they have an actual experience of themselves as important and valuable. And that will generate a sense of closeness that will build and fortify the growing bond between you.
2. **Attunement:** Attunement is the practice of leaning in to listen to another beyond what's actually being said with words. It's listening to someone outside of language—noticing their body language, their level of eye contact, their tone of voice, their breathe... all of the nuances of communication that are easily missed unless one is consciously attuning to another.

Rather than tending to the person speaking, most of us are instead covertly concentrating on ourselves, and our own agenda. Can I get my needs met here? Is he saying what I want him to say? Am I getting her to do what I want her to do? We listen for how we might reply in order to save face, or to make that person give us what we want.

Yet attuned listening is care in action and it both creates instant rapport with someone you are just getting to know, and depth of connection with someone you've known for years, solidifying and strengthening the bond between you.

3. **Appreciation.** Studies show that those who have secure attachment are aware of and present to the positive traits and strengths of their partners, even when they're upset and/or angry with them. Appreciation as a practice is the deliberate leaning in to notice all that you can genuinely appreciate about your partner, whether or not you actually acknowledge it out loud. It's a way of holding someone in your heart--an orientation towards truly valuing others and the many ways that they are a blessing to you.

If we feel covertly disrespectful, indifferent and/or superior to others, even if we don't say it out loud, others will feel it emanating from us and not like us, often without knowing why. Yet, cultivating genuine appreciation for another will also be sensed, and cause others to seek us out as their safe place in life, and generating a solid relational home that can last a lifetime.

4.) **Acknowledgement.** The practice of acknowledgement is the actual expression of appreciation and praise for the things that you genuinely like, value, respect, admire and appreciation about another. It is an act of generosity because you are offering your acknowledgement without pulling on others to reciprocate in any way. Whether that be a tit-for-tat compliment, or for those less tangible things we are trying to get such as covertly pulling on someone to like us, to choose us, or to not leave us. That kind of giving is “giving to get” and it will always feel slightly toxic to the person you are praising. Yet the generous affirmation of someone's character, talents and gifts will build a bridge between yourself and others, and will confirm the value of the connection in a way that can last for many years to come.

Personal Practice: In Healthy Habit #3, you are invited to practice cultivating empathy between yourself and others, generating the experience of being in something together.

1. **Close Your Eyes & imagine a Person Sitting Before You Whom You'd Like To Be Closer To.** Think of a person you'd like to have a deeper connection with and imagine that person sitting in front of you.
2. **Be Attentive to Detail.** Imagine greeting this person warmly, and extend your attention to notice as many details as you can about him or her. Notice the look in his eyes, the tone of her voice, his body language and/or her facial expression. Notice too the life stage this person is in, and imagine the important goals to which he or she might be aspiring. Lean in to discover what his or her most critical needs might be during this phase of his or her life. What are the challenges he or she might be facing? What might be at stake for him or her in realizing these goals and in overcoming these challenges?

3. **Attune to the Inner World of this Person.** Imagine that you could peak into the inner world of this person before you. What might they be feeling that they have not yet said out loud? What do you sense he or she might need the most at this juncture of life? What deep desires might be driving them? What might they most be struggling with?
4. **Appreciate the Other Person.** Notice also what you most deeply admire and appreciate about this person. What is really unique and special about him or her? What character traits have they displayed that you authentically respect? What talents are you in awe of? What gifts do they bring that truly bless others? What can you appreciate about him or her? Generously extend a sense of appreciation and admiration to this person in your heart.
5. **Acknowledge the Other Person.** Now imagine that you can actually share some things that you truly appreciate and admire about this person directly to him or her. What could you say without agenda that would genuinely build rapport and deepen your connection?

Doing this practice will begin to shift the energy between yourself and anyone you do it with, for it activates the dynamic field of relatedness that is outside of time and space. Try it and see if you can deepen your bond with others just by using your imagination!

Reflection Questions

Healthy Habit #3: Cultivate Empathy Self-Inquiry

Journal on the following:

1. Ask yourself, “Who would I like to be closer to?”
2. Ask yourself, “If I imagine that person sitting in front of me and lean in with my full attention, what details can I notice about who he is, what stage of life he is in, what his goals, needs and desires may be, as well as his unique challenges at this point in time in his life?”
3. Ask yourself, “What do I imagine might be happening in her inner world that touches my heart? What do I sense she might be feeling and needing at this point in her life? What do I sense she may need right now that is driving her choices and behavior?”
4. Ask yourself, “What do I genuinely appreciate and admire about this person? What character traits, talents and gifts do I recognize as exceptional and worthy of my respect? What about this person inspires awe in me?”
5. Ask yourself, “What would I actually like to tell this person about what I most admire and appreciate about her?”

After you have written it in your journal, make an effort to express your appreciation without any need for her to reciprocate or give you something in return, and simply as a generous gesture of your love.

Note: You may do the above practice with more than one person you'd like to be closer to, yet to fully receive the benefits, only do it with one person at a time.