

5 Ways to Turn Sympathetic Statements Into Empathetic Ones

(Originally published in *The Mighty*:

<https://themighty.com/2017/04/whats-the-difference-between-sympathy-and-empathy/>)

“Sympathy” and “empathy” are two words so often used interchangeably that it’s rare to find two people who agree on exactly what the difference is.

The way I see it, sympathy is “feeling for,” and empathy is “feeling with.” Put another way, sympathy is telling someone you care, while empathy is showing it. At Crisis Text Line, we like to think we’re in the empathy business, and value empathy as a skill — it’s the key tenet of our Crisis Counselor training, which prepares our volunteers to work with people in crisis via text message.

We recognize everyone’s experience is different. It’s impossible for any one person to know exactly what another is feeling, because they’ll never be in precisely the same set of circumstances.

That’s why we don’t think of empathy in terms of sharing a person’s experience, we think of it as actively listening and genuinely trying to understand that experience to reflect back what it might feel like.

There are many ways you might be practicing sympathy in your life that can easily be turned into more meaningful and powerful acts of empathy.

1. Hold back on the advice.

The instinct to give advice is totally natural, but that’s often not what people are looking for. Bits of (sometimes terrible) advice are a dime-a-dozen, but thoughtful listening is rare. Instead of offering a friend unsolicited advice, try asking what they think they should do.

Example: “You know yourself best. What do you think would be most helpful to you right now?”

2. Avoid showing pity.

There are few things that make a person feel smaller than the sense that they're being pitied. Replace expressions of pity (anything along the lines of "You poor thing") with identifications of the person's strengths.

Example: "You're showing so much self-awareness in this situation. It's really admirable. Thanks for being brave enough to come to me with this."

3. Don't assume you know the whole story.

When someone is telling you about their experience, it's easy to believe you know exactly how they feel. Again, it's impossible to know exactly how someone is feeling. Replace "I know you feel..." with more tentative statements like, "It sounds like you're feeling..."

Example: "It seems like all this has left you feeling embarrassed, is that right?"

4. Validate difficult emotions.

Expressing painful emotions is never easy, and can leave someone feeling vulnerable. You can help mitigate the fear around it by validating the way someone is feeling, and letting them know it's OK to not be OK.

Example: "It makes perfect sense that you're feeling frustrated right now."

5. Ask questions.

When someone's struggling, showing a real interest in what they're saying goes a long way. Don't be afraid to come right out and ask questions that allow them to further explain how they're feeling. The caveat is to avoid "curiosity questions," or questions that seek details, but don't do anything but feed into your own desire to know more. Another type of question to avoid is the "why" question, which can sound judgmental, even when it's not meant to be. Try rewording "why" questions into "how" questions to make them more effective.

Example: "How were you feeling when this first happened?"

Turning your sympathy into empathy takes practice, but if you keep these five strategies in mind, you'll be well on your way to being a more empathetic friend, partner, co-worker and family member.

