

Activity 4.5 Nurturing Intentional Empathy¹

Description

Traditional notions of empathy tend to encourage individuals to place themselves in another's circumstances and consider how they would react. It is a cognitive maneuver. Intentional empathy is when individuals try to place themselves in another's circumstances—in their shoes—and make a sincere effort to engage with their thought process and emotions from that perspective. This additional facet of viewing issues through the other's lens (and not just circumstance) allows for individuals to gain a fuller appreciation of others' perspectives and experiences and can allow for the development of a greater psychological safety net within the group.

Building empathy in collaborative discussion requires us to not only recognize and respond to the emotions, but to inquire and explore with others the circumstances and situations which prompted these feelings. This exploration also helps ensure we are not acting from generalizations or assumptions about why people are experiencing or expressing emotions.

Learning Goals

- Understand the importance of intentional empathy for building psychological safety within a collaborative discussion space
- Utilize intentional empathy as a tool for deeper, more nuanced understanding

Practice (35 minutes)

Step One	Set up <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce the concept of intentional empathy (see above)• Share that responding with intentional empathy requires two parts:<ul style="list-style-type: none">a) <i>first acknowledging and reflecting back to the speaker the emotion that you sense they are experiencing and</i>b) <i>asking a question that would help the person responding understand the circumstances that have generated these emotions.</i>• Copy one of the following scenarios and the Emotion Wheel for participants. Distribute hard copies or share on an overhead projector or share electronically (if working online).	5 min
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¹ **Citation for this activity:** Lori Britt & Noah Miller (2021). Nurturing Intentional Empathy. In Hartman, Britt, & Byrd (Eds). *The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit*. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/module-4-culturally-responsive-collaboration>

Step Two	<p>In small groups or pairs, review the chosen scenario. Participants can even read aloud the dialogue as a group or in pairs.</p> <p>Scenario One (recommended for classrooms) Students working on a group project, which counts for a significant part of their grade, are experiencing some challenges. Here is an exchange between two group members:</p> <p>Student 1: I know I did not make the meeting last night but my schedule is nuts and I figured I could just email you an update about my part.</p> <p>Student 2: But we needed you here to think with us. And I keep reminding the group this project is supposed to be a group effort, but no one seems to pay any attention to this.</p> <p>Student 1: We are all working on parts of it, so we are making it a group effort. Plus, there is no way I could have been here last night. I had to pick up another shift at work.</p> <p>Student 3: I have to get an A on this project. My GPA depends on it. I am applying to law school and I really need an A in this class.</p> <p>Student 2: Well the only way we will get an A is if everyone stops flaking and shows up for meetings!</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Scenario Two (recommended for community groups) A group of concerned community members have been engaging as an advisory group to help the city improve local transportation options. Here is an exchange within the group.</p> <p>Participant 1: We have been focusing on bus service quite a bit, but I think we also need to consider how the city might set up a formal mechanism for ride sharing as well.</p> <p>Participant 2: But ride share programs overlook the reality that many people face. As usual, it seems as if solutions are favoring those who have options and multiple options available to them.</p> <p>Participant 1: But our bus ridership numbers are way down so we need to look at other transportation options.</p> <p>Participant 2: You want to know why ridership is down? Because they have changed and decreased the bus routes. There is not one route that I can use every day at the same time to get to work. People are not using the buses because they have been forced to find other ways to get to work that are reliable. I have been late to work 5 times this month. I can't lose this job.</p>	5 min
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<p>Step Three</p>	<p>Ask participants to review the Emotion Wheel and think about how Participant One can respond in a way that showcases intentional empathy.</p> <p>Your goal is to write a response that includes a question for Participant One that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognizes and names the emotion you think you are hearing (of either participant 2 or 3) and • helps you and others recognize the source of these emotions 	<p>10 min</p>
<p>Step Four</p>	<p><i>Be prepared that participants may not succeed in creating intentional empathy responses or questions on the first try.</i></p> <p>Participants' first attempts at this often result in responses that offer solutions to "fix the problem." They are often not even aware that this is what they are doing. It is a great learning opportunity to see that this is a first instinct for many of us so don't discourage or preempt this possibility. Allow it to be a teaching moment.</p> <p>Be prepared to have participants repeat their efforts to shape messages of real intentional empathy and not problem-solving.</p>	<p>5 min</p>
<p>Step Five</p>	<p>Debrief as a full group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it feel like to reflect a person's feelings back to them? Does the Emotion Wheel help you name emotions? • How can asking questions help us to recognize the cognitive dimension of emotions? Does making this connection build empathy? • How would demonstrating intentional empathy impact group dynamics? • What role might sustained empathy have for group dynamics? How might you follow-up and check-in with group members? • How would intentional empathy advance collaboration? • When is intentional empathy NOT helpful in a collaborative experience? When should it be avoided? 	<p>10 min</p>

Reflection Assignment

- Why is intentional empathy important for collaborative discussion?
- What does intentional empathy provide that might be absent in a discussion?
- Why might intentional empathy have a negative connotation?
- Why might it be avoided by some in a collaborative experience?

Practice Journal

Practice intentional empathy in your day-to-day life this week, making extra effort to try and engage with others adversity through their eyes. Try to follow-up and develop sustained intentional empathy. Describe your experience and note how intentional empathy impacted your life this week. Reflect on how to best utilize intentional empathy as a facilitator to maximize the benefit.

