Understanding Empathy

A Practical Guide to Building Stronger Relationships

FREE Educational Guide

By Maria Shkreli, LMHC

Educational Disclaimer

This educational guide is intended for self-reflection and informational purposes only. It is not a diagnostic tool and should not be used to diagnose any mental health condition. Completing this guide does not establish a therapist-client relationship. If difficulties with empathy, communication, or relationships are significantly affecting your daily life or emotional well-being, consider seeking support from a qualified mental health professional.

What Is Empathy?

Empathy is one of the most important skills we can develop, yet it is often misunderstood.

Many people believe empathy means agreeing with someone, fixing their problems, or putting another person's needs before their own.

It doesn't.

Empathy is the ability to understand another person's thoughts, emotions, or experiences while still maintaining your own perspective.

Healthy empathy allows us to connect with people without losing ourselves in the process.

It can help us communicate more effectively, strengthen relationships, reduce conflict, and respond with greater understanding.

At the same time, empathy does not mean accepting unhealthy behavior, giving up your boundaries, or becoming responsible for another person's emotions.

You can understand why someone feels the way they do and still disagree with them.

You can care about someone's pain without making it your responsibility to fix it.

You can be empathetic and still say no.

Whether you are a parent, partner, friend, coworker, or leader, empathy influences nearly every relationship you have.

Learning how empathy works can help you better understand other people while also becoming more aware of how you respond during difficult conversations.

Why Empathy Matters

Most people want to feel heard and understood.

When someone feels that we are genuinely trying to understand their experience, communication often becomes easier.

That doesn't mean the disagreement disappears.

It means the conversation can happen differently.

Empathy encourages us to slow down before reacting.

Instead of immediately defending ourselves, making assumptions, giving advice, or deciding who is right, we become curious.

What is this person actually trying to tell me?

What might they be feeling?

Am I listening to understand, or am I waiting for my turn to respond?

Those small changes can make a big difference in relationships.

It is also important to remember that empathy works both ways.

Understanding another person's emotions should not require you to ignore your own.

Healthy empathy includes respect for the other person **and** respect for yourself.

The Three Types of Empathy

Although we often talk about empathy as one skill, there are different ways we experience and express it.

Understanding these differences can help you recognize both your strengths and the areas where you may struggle.

Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another person's point of view.

You may not personally feel what the other person is feeling, but you can understand why they might see the situation differently.

Someone with strong cognitive empathy may think:

"I don't necessarily agree with you, but I can understand why you feel that way."

Common strengths may include:

- Seeing different perspectives
- Problem-solving
- Remaining calm during difficult conversations
- Understanding another person's point of view
- Communicating logically during conflict

One possible challenge is that you may understand someone's feelings intellectually but have difficulty showing emotional warmth or connection.

The person may know you understand what they are saying but still not *feel* understood.

Emotional Empathy

Emotional empathy involves actually feeling some of what another person is experiencing.

You may quickly notice changes in someone's mood, facial expression, tone of voice, or emotional energy.

When someone you care about is hurting, you may feel that pain very deeply yourself.

Common strengths may include:

- Strong emotional awareness
- Compassion
- Sensitivity to other people's feelings
- Emotional connection
- Recognizing when someone is struggling

The challenge can come when another person's emotions begin to feel like your own.

You may become overwhelmed, feel guilty when someone is upset, or believe it is your responsibility to make the other person feel better.

Empathy becomes harder to manage when caring for someone turns into carrying their emotions for them.

Compassionate Empathy

Compassionate empathy brings understanding and emotional awareness together with an appropriate response.

You recognize what another person may be experiencing and respond with care, while still understanding where your responsibility begins and ends.

Sometimes that means listening.

Sometimes it means offering support.

Sometimes it means asking:

"What do you need from me right now?"

And sometimes it means recognizing that you cannot solve the problem for them.

Common strengths may include:

- Thoughtful responses
- Supportive communication
- Emotional awareness
- Healthy boundaries
- Knowing when to listen rather than immediately fix
- Caring about others without taking complete responsibility for their emotions

Compassionate empathy allows you to be emotionally present for another person while still maintaining your own boundaries and emotional well-being.

Empathy Does Not Mean Fixing Everything

This is an important distinction.

When someone we care about is struggling, our first reaction may be to give advice or find a solution.

We may say:

“Here's what you should do.”

“Don't worry about it.”

“It's not that bad.”

“Just forget about it.”

The intention may be good.

But sometimes the person isn't asking us to fix anything.

They may simply want to be heard.

An empathetic response might sound more like:

“That sounds really difficult.”

“I can understand why that upset you.”

“Do you want me to listen, or do you want help figuring out what to do?”

That last question can change an entire conversation.

It gives the other person an opportunity to tell you what kind of support they actually need.

Empathy and Boundaries

Empathy without boundaries can become exhausting.

If you regularly feel responsible for everyone's emotions, problems, conflicts, or happiness, you may eventually become emotionally drained or resentful.

Healthy empathy allows two things to be true at the same time:

“I care about what you're going through.”

and

“I am not responsible for solving everything for you.”

You can support someone and still have limits.

You can understand someone's anger without accepting disrespect.

You can understand someone's disappointment without changing a healthy boundary.

You can love someone without taking responsibility for every emotion they experience.

Empathy and boundaries are not opposites.

Healthy relationships usually need both.

Empathy Self-Assessment

Instructions

Rate each statement based on how accurately it describes you in your relationships and interactions with others.

Try to answer based on how you usually respond, especially during stress or disagreement.

0 = Never
1 = Rarely
2 = Sometimes
3 = Often
4 = Always

1. I try to understand another person's perspective before responding. _____
2. I can listen to someone without immediately trying to solve their problem. _____
3. I notice when another person's mood, tone, or emotions change. _____
4. I can remain respectful even when I disagree with how another person feels. _____
5. I ask questions rather than immediately assuming I know what someone means. _____
6. I can acknowledge another person's feelings without necessarily agreeing with their behavior. _____
7. I can support someone without feeling responsible for fixing their problems. _____
8. I can care deeply about another person's feelings while still maintaining my own emotional boundaries. _____
9. During conversations, I make an effort to listen rather than simply waiting for my turn to respond. _____
10. I can recognize when someone may need understanding rather than advice. _____
11. I can recognize when I am beginning to take on another person's emotions as if they were my own. _____
12. I can show empathy while still saying "no" or maintaining a boundary when necessary. _____

Understanding Your Score

Total Score: _____ /48

This score is not a measure of whether you are a "good" or "bad" person.

Empathy is more complicated than a number.

Your responses are meant to help you notice how you listen, understand other people's perspectives, respond to emotions, and maintain boundaries while caring about others.

0–12

Your responses suggest that empathy may be difficult for you to express consistently, particularly during conflict, stress, or emotionally uncomfortable situations.

You may find yourself focusing more on solving the problem, defending your position, or responding quickly rather than slowing down to understand the other person's experience.

This does not mean you do not care about other people.

Empathy is a skill that can be practiced and strengthened.

13–24

Your responses suggest that you demonstrate empathy in some situations but may find it more difficult in others.

You may be able to understand another person's perspective when things are calm but struggle when you feel criticized, frustrated, defensive, or emotionally overwhelmed.

Look at the questions where you scored lower. They may help you recognize specific areas where you would like to grow.

25–36

Your responses suggest that you demonstrate many healthy empathy skills.

You are generally able to consider another person's perspective and emotions while communicating with respect.

There may still be situations where empathy becomes more difficult, particularly during conflict or when your own emotions are strong.

Continue paying attention to the balance between understanding others and maintaining your own emotional boundaries.

37–48

Your responses suggest strong empathy skills across several areas, including listening, perspective-taking, emotional awareness, and boundaries.

Continue remembering that strong empathy does not mean becoming responsible for everyone else's emotions.

Even highly empathetic people need boundaries.

Pay attention to whether caring for others ever turns into overextending yourself, absorbing their emotions, or feeling responsible for fixing problems that are not yours to solve.

Look Beyond the Number

Your total score gives you one piece of information.

Your individual answers may tell you even more.

Look back at your responses.

Do you score highly on understanding other people's perspectives but lower on recognizing their emotions?

Do you easily feel what other people are feeling but struggle to separate their emotions from your own?

Are you good at supporting people but find yourself trying to fix everything?

Can you understand someone's feelings but struggle to show that understanding during conflict?

These patterns can help you recognize whether cognitive, emotional, or compassionate empathy comes more naturally to you.

There is no need to fit perfectly into one category.

Most people use a combination of all three.

Reflection

Take a few moments to think about how empathy shows up in your relationships.

When is it easiest for me to show empathy?

When do I find empathy most difficult?

Do I listen to understand, or do I sometimes begin preparing my response while the other person is still talking?

Do I sometimes take on other people's emotions or feel responsible for making them feel better?

Can I understand someone's feelings while still maintaining a boundary?

What is one change I can make this week to become a more empathetic communicator?

Final Thoughts

Empathy is not about agreeing with everyone.

It is not about fixing every problem.

And it is not about carrying another person's emotional burden.

Empathy is about making an effort to understand another person's experience while remaining aware of your own feelings, needs, and boundaries.

Sometimes empathy means listening.

Sometimes it means asking a question instead of making an assumption.

Sometimes it means saying:

"I understand why you feel that way."

And sometimes empathy exists alongside a boundary:

"I understand that you're upset, but I'm still not comfortable with that."

Both can be true.

The goal is not to become a perfect communicator.

The goal is to become more aware of what happens when another person is speaking to you—especially when you disagree.

Are you listening?

Are you defending?

Are you trying to fix?

Are you assuming?

Or are you trying to understand?

Small changes in the way we listen and respond can make a meaningful difference in our relationships.

Empathy starts with understanding another person.

Healthy empathy also remembers not to lose yourself in the process.

Continue Your Learning

If this guide helped you better understand empathy and how it shows up in your relationships, you can continue your learning with the complete workbook:

Understanding Empathy: Educational Workbook & Self-Assessment

The full workbook explores empathy in greater depth through expanded educational chapters, a more comprehensive self-assessment, score interpretations, reflection exercises, and practical tools designed to help you strengthen communication, understand emotional patterns, maintain healthier boundaries, and improve the way you connect with others.

Thank you for downloading this educational guide. I hope it helped you think a little differently about empathy—not only how well you understand other people, but also how you listen, respond, communicate, and maintain yourself within your relationships.

Maria Shkreli, LMHC