

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. In reality, empathy is the ability to understand another person's thoughts, emotions, and experiences while maintaining your own perspective.

Healthy empathy allows us to connect without losing ourselves. It helps us communicate more effectively, strengthen relationships, reduce conflict, and respond with greater understanding. At the same time, empathy does not mean accepting unhealthy behavior, sacrificing your boundaries, or becoming responsible for another person's emotions.

Whether you are a parent, partner, friend, coworker, or leader, empathy influences nearly every interaction you have. Learning how empathy works can improve the quality of your relationships while helping you communicate with greater confidence and emotional awareness.

This guide is designed to introduce the concept of empathy and help you reflect on your own interpersonal strengths. It is intended for educational and self-reflection purposes only and should not be considered a psychological evaluation or substitute for professional mental health care.

Why Empathy Matters

Empathy is one of the foundations of healthy relationships. It allows us to better understand another person's experience, even when we disagree with their perspective. When people feel heard and understood, communication often becomes more respectful, conflict becomes easier to manage, and relationships become stronger.

Empathy also improves emotional awareness. Rather than reacting impulsively or making assumptions, empathy encourages curiosity. It helps us pause, ask questions, and seek understanding before forming conclusions.

It is important to remember that empathy does not require agreement. You can understand someone's feelings without approving of their behavior. Likewise, empathy does not require sacrificing your own needs or boundaries. Healthy empathy allows you to care about others while maintaining respect for yourself.

The Three Types of Empathy

Although empathy is often discussed as one skill, it is actually made up of three different ways of connecting with others.

Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another person's perspective without necessarily experiencing their emotions yourself. It allows you to recognize why someone feels the way they do while remaining emotionally grounded.

Common strengths include:

- Good problem-solving
- Strong communication
- Remaining calm during difficult conversations

Potential challenge:

Others may perceive you as logical but emotionally distant.

Emotional Empathy

Emotional empathy involves feeling another person's emotions on a deeper level. You naturally absorb emotional experiences and are often highly sensitive to changes in mood, tone, or energy.

Common strengths include:

- Compassion
- Emotional awareness
- Strong emotional connection with others

Potential challenge:

You may become emotionally overwhelmed or begin taking responsibility for emotions that belong to someone else.

Compassionate Empathy

Compassionate empathy combines understanding, emotional awareness, and healthy action. Rather than becoming overwhelmed or emotionally detached, you are able to support others while maintaining healthy boundaries.

Common strengths include:

- Balanced emotional awareness
- Healthy boundaries
- Thoughtful responses
- Supportive communication

This is generally considered the healthiest form of empathy because it allows you to care about others without losing yourself in the process.

Empathy Self-Assessment

Instructions

Rate each statement using the scale below.

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

1. I try to understand another person's perspective before responding.
2. I listen without immediately trying to solve the problem.
3. I recognize when someone is emotionally struggling.
4. I remain respectful even when I disagree with another person's feelings.
5. I ask questions before making assumptions.
6. I validate another person's emotions without necessarily agreeing with their behavior.
7. I can support someone without feeling responsible for fixing their problems.
8. I maintain healthy emotional boundaries while caring about others.
9. People generally describe me as a good listener.
10. I try to understand before expecting to be understood.

Understanding Your Score

Total Score: _____ /50

40–50

You demonstrate strong empathy skills. You generally balance understanding, emotional awareness, and healthy boundaries. Continue strengthening these skills through curiosity, active listening, and open communication.

30–39

You demonstrate many healthy empathy skills while identifying opportunities for continued growth. Increasing self-awareness and practicing active listening may further strengthen your relationships.

20–29

Your empathy skills may become inconsistent during periods of stress, conflict, or emotional discomfort. Developing greater emotional awareness and perspective-taking may improve your communication and relationships.

10–19

You may benefit from intentionally strengthening your empathy skills. Learning to listen with curiosity, ask thoughtful questions, and better understand another person's perspective can improve both personal and professional relationships.

Reflection

Take a few moments to reflect on your responses.

When is it easiest for me to show empathy?

When do I find empathy most difficult?

Do I tend to listen to understand, or do I immediately begin thinking about how to respond?

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

Final Thoughts

Empathy is not about agreeing with everyone or carrying another person's emotional burden. It is about understanding another person's experience while maintaining your own emotional well-being and healthy boundaries.

The goal is not to become a perfect communicator. The goal is to become more curious, more intentional, and more aware of how you connect with others. Small changes in the way we listen, respond, and communicate often create meaningful improvements in our relationships over time.

If you found this guide helpful, continue your learning with the complete workbook, *Understanding Empathy: Educational Workbook & Self-Assessment*. The full workbook explores empathy in greater depth through comprehensive educational chapters, an expanded self-assessment, score interpretations, reflection exercises, and practical insights designed to help you strengthen your communication, improve your relationships, and better understand yourself and others.

Thank you for downloading this educational guide. I hope it has provided greater insight into your empathy skills and encouraged you to continue learning about the patterns that shape healthy relationships.

Maria Shkreli, LMHC