

How to increase your empathy skills

In this guide I will share what empathy is about and how you can increase your empathy skills.

A few definitions of empathy

So what is empathy? It is important to get an idea of what empathy means before being able to increase your own empathy skills. Here are three examples of empathy definitions:

“Sensing others’ feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns; the ability to put yourself in another’s place and to take that perspective into account in your relationship with the other person”. (*The institute for social- and emotional intelligence*)

“The capacity to know emotionally what another is experiencing from within the frame of reference of that other person, the capacity to sample the feelings of another or to put oneself in another’s shoes”. (*D. M. Berger*)

“To empathize means to share, to experience the feelings of another person”. (*R. Greenon*)

It all begins with your own self-awareness

A prerequisite to be empathetic is to master the ability to know, understand and name your own emotions. If you are not aware that you have experienced a certain feeling, it is difficult for you to understand what another person is feeling. So, it all begins with your own self-awareness – which is part of your emotional intelligence. See figure below in this document for the 26 competencies in social- and emotional intelligence.

From the standpoint of emotional intelligence, empathy involves at least three concepts:

1. **Listening** for another's emotional state and having sensitivity for the other person's feelings, is arguably the first step

2. **Understanding** what that person might be feeling or experiencing at this moment, both cognitively and emotionally, and

3. **Verbally expressing**, communicating and acknowledging our perception of the "internal frame of reference of another" and our "sense of similarity of feelings."

Empathy is the capacity to know – emotionally – what another is experiencing, AND being able to express or communicate our feelings of empathy. If we do not, we may feel empathy, but the other person may not know that we do. To enhance the relationship, it is important to express (verbally, or through our body language, tone, or actions) that we understand, acknowledge and share the experience and feelings of the other person.

When people feel listened to and understood at a deep emotional level, and when that understanding is acknowledged or communicated, people feel affirmed and validated. *Source: Institute for social- and emotional intelligence*

Empathy is a key factor in social intelligence

The illustration below shows the 26 competencies in social- and emotional intelligence. The left column shows competencies in emotional intelligence and the right column shows competencies in social intelligence. You might notice that empathy is the first competency in the second column representing social intelligence. This actually means that empathy is the most important skill in social intelligence. This is a good place to start if you want to excel in social relations.



How to increase and train empathy

Now you know the definition of empathy and how it relates to social intelligence. The next question is therefore: how do you increase and train your own empathy? Here are four bullets plus an exercise to keep in mind and practice in order to enhance your empathy skills.

- ✓ Listen deeply to the other person. What does this person need? What is this person saying if I remove all my filters? Listen for more than words
- ✓ Acknowledge what you think you have heard. Repeat back to the other person and clarify the feelings you think you are hearing (e.g. “it sound like you´re feeling irritated” or “it sounds like you really enjoy this party”)

- ✓ Keep your opinions for yourself. Don't share your story on the same topic. You probably don't need the last word 😊 Just listen and acknowledge the other person
- ✓ Take a walk in the other person's shoes. Try to feel, what it might be like to be them with their resources at the moment, with their capabilities and their knowledge. How might they feel and what might they need?

Exercise to communicate on different levels

There are four levels of communication: **superficial, fact, thought, and feeling**. With some people, you never get past the first two levels – the superficial level and the level of simply discussing facts. To increase your skills of empathy, you want to reach that last level and share your feelings with others more openly so that they will in return open up to you. This appropriate self-disclosure also increases others' trust in you, improving communication overall.

1. Superficial statement _____

(e.g., "Hi, how are you?")

2. State a fact _____

(e.g., "I have a cold.")

3. Express a thought _____

(e.g., "I think there's something going around.")

4. Share a feeling _____

Knowing the 4 levels of communication you can practice to get to level 4 to increase your skills of empathy. You can also reflect on which levels you tend to communicate on with certain people and then consider what it will take to move you to a deeper level. Consider how switching levels of communication can help others to manage their emotions. For example, if someone is very angry, it may help to switch from feelings to facts.

Six habits of highly empathic people

Below I share the findings from a 2012 study on empathy and what habits you can pursue to increase your empathy.

*“We can cultivate empathy throughout our lives”, says **Roman Krznaric**, “and use it as a radical force for social transformation”.*

Roman Krznaric is a founding faculty member of [The School of Life in London](#), an empathy adviser to organizations like Oxfam and the United Nations, and a former teacher of sociology and politics at Cambridge University. In 2012 [he shared the latest science on empathy with UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center](#).

"Empathy doesn't stop developing in childhood. We can nurture its growth throughout our lives--and we can use it as a radical force for social transformation," he writes. "Research in sociology, psychology, history--and my own studies of empathic personalities over the past 10 years--reveals how we can make empathy an attitude and [a part of our daily lives](#)."

If you want to increase your empathy quotient, he suggests developing several habits, including these:

Habit 1: Cultivate curiosity about strangers

Curiosity expands our empathy when we talk to people outside our usual social circle, encountering lives and worldviews very different from our own. Cultivating curiosity requires more than having a brief chat about the weather. Crucially, it tries to understand the world inside the head of the other person.

Challenge: Set yourself the challenge of having a conversation with one stranger every week. All it requires is courage. Where and when will you start?

Habit 2: Challenge prejudices and discover commonalities

We all have assumptions about others and use collective labels—e.g., “Muslim fundamentalist,” “welfare mom”—that prevent us from appreciating their individuality. High empathy persons challenge their own preconceptions and prejudices by searching for what they share with people rather than what divides them.

Challenge: think of someone you don’t like and brainstorm what you share/have in common with this person.

Habit 3: Try another person’s life

“Walk a mile in another man’s moccasins before you criticize him.” We can each conduct our own experiments. If you are rich, try the life of a poor. If you are top leader, try the life of a person ‘on the floor’. If you always travel by car, try the life of a pedestrian or a cyclist.

Challenge: What ‘shoes’ will you learn the most from? What will you do to try to walk them?

Habit 4: Listen hard—and open up

There are two traits required for being an empathic conversationalist.

1: To master the art of radical listening which is “our ability to be present to what’s really going on within—to the unique feelings and needs that a person is experiencing in that very moment.” But listening is never enough.

2: The second trait is to make ourselves vulnerable. Removing our masks and revealing our feelings to someone is vital for creating a strong empathic bond. Empathy is a two-way street that, at its best, is built upon mutual understanding—an exchange of our most important beliefs and experiences.

Challenge: With whom can you practice to listen deeply, open up to and reveal your vulnerability? And when will you start practicing?

Habit 5: Inspire mass action and social change

We typically assume empathy happens at the level of individuals, but high empathy people understand that empathy can also be a mass phenomenon that brings about fundamental social change. This will only happen if social networks learn to spread not just information, but empathic connection.

Challenge: What community or mass social change, that enforces empathic connection, can you be a part of?

Habit 6: Develop an ambitious imagination

A final trait of high empathy people is that they do far more than empathize with the usual suspects. We tend to believe empathy should be reserved for those living on the social margins or who are suffering. This is necessary, but it is hardly enough.

We also need to empathize with people whose beliefs we don't share or who may be "enemies" in some way.

Challenge: Who are an opponent to you and how can you stretch yourself to 'take a walk in that persons shoes'?

Action plan

I have provided some background on empathy and some strategies for you to develop your empathy. Now it is time to act and change!

How will you like to practice and increase your empathy? You can choose from any of the above topics.

What are your biggest preventions to practice empathy?

How can you reduce your preventions?

What is your very first step to practice your empathy skills?

Enjoy the ride towards more empathy in your life 😊.