

Healthy Relations Team Empathy Blockers

Giving advice

Resolving disagreements requires remembering our own position while at the same time allowing awareness of where the other person is coming from. Empathy blocks prevent us from understanding what the other person is experiencing.

Giving advice (“I think you should...”) helps keep us in our own viewpoint and unaware of what others see and know, thus preventing the best resolution of an issue.

Educating

(“This would work if you just...”) locates the problems in another person, who needs to wise up, instead of searching for mutual understanding.

One-upping

“That’s nothing, wait until you hear about what happened to me!”

Have you ever shared something important or difficult with someone, and heard some version of the above phrase? Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of someone else. Unfortunately, in our rush to demonstrate that understanding, we may engage in “one-upping”. One-upping shifts the focus onto ourselves, unlike attentive listening which builds understanding and trust.

Consoling

“It wasn’t your fault. You did the best you could.”

Maybe someone you know has been blaming themselves and assigning themselves complete responsibility for something that went wrong. Of course, you want to give reassurance, hoping that consoling words will help them feel better. Consoling someone shifts the focus to what we think they should do – stop blaming themselves and feel better. Just “get over it.” A more empathetic approach is to listen and spend time understanding how the situation looks to the other person instead of imposing our judgment about who is to blame.

Sympathy

“Oh you poor thing. I’m so sorry.”

Sympathy is all about feeling sorry for someone’s misfortunes. Empathy is the ability to understand the distress of another person. In empathy, we can imagine ourselves in the same situation. We learn empathy by attentive listening to other’s stories and witnessing their pain. An empathetic approach is about connection, not about solutions. Sometimes empathy is the solution.

Story-telling

“The same thing happened to me! Did I ever tell you about the time....?” “You think you have a problem. Listen to what happened to my uncle...”

We humans are natural storytellers and telling stories is an important way we connect with each other. However, if we wish to respond with empathy, attentive listening is more helpful than storytelling, which can pull the focus away from someone needing our care. Empathy can be challenging because it requires we bear witness to another's pain and as skillfully as possible communicate our care and understanding. Sharing a heartfelt story may be helpful at a later time, after first allowing someone to tell their story, listening carefully, and communicating our understanding.

Shutting Down

“Cheer up. Don’t feel so bad. Come on, let’s go shopping.”

When shutting down, what we are really communicating is that the person shouldn’t feel sad or angry and that they should accept the situation and move past their feelings. If we listen attentively to the person in distress, we can choose a response that opens up communication. Sympathetic phrases include “I’m listening” or “this seems really important to you.” These types of phrases allow the person to express their feelings and opens the possibility of problem solving.

Questioning

When we are using listening skills to increase empathy, asking questions can either be a good practice or one that can shut down communication quickly. Open-ended, judgment-free questions that demonstrate curiosity and a genuine desire to know and understand the situation can be helpful in our wish to be empathic.

Some examples include:

“What’s most frustrating to you about this situation?”

“Can you tell me more about your perspective on what is happening?”

However, questioning done poorly becomes interrogation and sounds judgmental. Presumptive or leading questions indicate criticism or a defensive stance. Examples of interrogating include:

“Are you just frustrated because you weren’t consulted about this?”

“Weren’t you making an excuse?”

Correction

“That’s not how it happened.”

Empathetic listeners recognize the speaker’s perception as their truth. The “That’s not really what happened” response to a distressed person does not validate how they are feeling about the situation. A more appropriate, nonjudgmental response may be “I appreciate hearing your perspective.” The listener’s desire to be right can hinder connection and create more hurt and frustration. Correction is the listener’s truth, not the speaker’s truth.

Reassuring

When someone is having a rough time, telling them “it will all be OK” may not have the intended effect of helping them feel better. They may not be in a frame of mind right

then to imagine a time when they won't feel as bad as they do now. Also, we don't know if it will be OK, or better, or just different. What can we do when we want to be helpful and supportive? A top strategy is to listen and provide validation for how they feel. Or provide assistance that goes with the circumstance – a meal, an afternoon or evening off to rest or do something fun. We can keep checking in with them to provide support, see how they feel, or assist with problem-solving if that's what they want.

Minimization

"It's not that big of a deal."

"Why get yourself so upset?"

"It doesn't really matter."

These are common responses when others relate troubling or upsetting feelings. What they all have in common is they minimize the importance of a situation and the feelings of the individual involved. Interestingly, minimization could also be used when receiving good news. In any event, minimization does not recognize the significance of the events that are being related. Empathy, on the other hand, can occur when we attempt to meet people where they are, not where we think they ought to be, by doing our best to acknowledge their thoughts and feelings. Oftentimes, simply reflecting and acknowledging others' feelings can bring comfort and relief to the speaker.

Diagnosing

"Your problem is you worry too much."

Wouldn't it be great if everyone knew as much as we do about what they should do to solve their problems. Then everybody could be happy, and things could go smoothly, right? Most people don't like to be told what their problems are, though. Telling people how to solve their problems can turn us into know-it-alls and actually make the person with the problem feel worse. If we see someone with a problem, we can ask if they want to be "helped, heard, or hugged." Asking that turns the focus back on what the other person needs, instead of focusing on what we need, which is to get the problem to go away.

Analyzing

"This seems to happen to you a lot."

The statement cited above is an example of something we might say to someone hoping with the best of intentions to express empathy, but which can unknowingly cause distance and disconnect between yourself and the person. The statement has several problems. Firstly, it analyzes the person's problem. Secondly, it possibly highlights what may be seen as one of their faults. And lastly, it comes across as criticism. In turn, it may cause them to become frustrated or irritated with you. Rather than analyzing their situation, a couple of things you could say to express empathy are: "I hear you" or "Tell me more" ..