Developing Empathy

Objective

To identify the needs of others and show your empathy through specific acts.

You Should Know

Do people often say to you that you do not understand them? Do people often refer to you as "uncaring"?

Empathy is the ability to not only see another person's point of view, but also to understand their feelings. Most people assume that everyone is born with the same capacity for empathy, but that is not really the case. Some people have a high degree of empathy and some people do not seem to have a great deal of empathy at all. Most scientists think that the degree of empathy a person has is a combination of their genetic make-up and their experience.

People brought up in a home where there was physical or emotional abuse, or where their parents had mental health problems like drug or alcohol abuse, may have more difficulty in feeling empathy for others when they are adults.

Whether or not you naturally feel empathy for others, it is still important to note that understanding the point of view of other people is important to having good relationships, whether they are with family, friends, or colleagues at work. Empathy is essential to developing any kind of intimate relationship with a spouse or partner.

This worksheet is designed to help you pay more attention to the needs of others by observing at least five people and performing an act which helps them without being asked.

What to Do

In the next week, look for opportunities to help others. Perform at least five acts for five different people which reflect your understanding of what each person needs. It could be as simple as holding a door for someone with an armful of groceries. Or, it could be a more elaborate and thoughtful act, like cooking or buying a surprise dinner for someone you care about who is busy and stressed.

Record what you saw that triggered your desire to help each person, what you actually did, and how they reacted.

You might want to make copies of this worksheet and increase your empathic behavior on an ongoing basis. If you practice this, you will likely find that you will have closer and more positive relationships with the people in your life.

Increasing Empathy and Helpful Behavior

Date	What triggered your empathy?	How did you express your empathy?	How did the person react to your good deed?

Reflections on this Exercise

Did you find it difficult to pay more attention to the needs of others? How did you remind yourself to do this?

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What was the most surprising reaction you got from the people you helped?

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Was there anything you would have done differently?

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How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn that might be helpful in your important relationships?

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