

# Sympathy vs. Empathy: What's the Difference and When Do I Use Them?



■ by Kathy Krentkowski, MA, LCPC, LMHC

**Do you know the difference between sympathy and empathy?** They sound similar, but they are very different emotional expressions of care and concern.

Test your skills:

## Does each statement communicate sympathy or empathy?

1. You must be so scared of your son entering the military.
2. I am so sorry you lost that promotion to your co-worker.
3. You poor thing.

## Answers:

1. Empathy
2. Sympathy
3. Sympathy, heavy on the pity

**Sympathy** is something you feel when you hear about someone else's struggle. Sometimes sympathy is followed by relief that what's causing someone else's pain is not happening to you. When this happens, sympathy looks like pity and can easily turn into trying to fix, solve, or give advice on how the other person should cope. At worst, sympathy can communicate shame because it can convey judgment.

Though it may be polite and kind, there is **emotional distance and separateness with sympathy**. You don't have to get emotionally invested when giving sympathy. Perhaps the most common expression of sympathy is when you hear about someone losing a loved one to death. You look for a sympathy card to send and say things like, "I'm so sorry for your loss. They're in a better place. This too shall pass." These words may be kind or helpful, but they may also be cold and distant.

**Empathy** is a deeper understanding and expression of emotion. Empathy communicates that **you can relate** to the other person because you have felt the emotion of what they are feeling too, or you can deeply imagine what that feeling must feel like. Empathy is vulnerable and much more personal, because it lets the other person know that you have shared in their pain. Empathy moves beyond sympathy when you can sit with someone, hear their pain, and say, "I am so sorry. This is really hard." Empathy fosters connection and opens the door to intimacy and closeness. It does not move to problem-solving. It is not dismissive. It states what is often left unspoken: "I see how painful this is. I get it. You are not alone."

Empathy lets the other person know **you are willing to feel emotions** and don't shy away from them. It's hard to relate to another person's struggle when you cannot relate to your own pain. People often hide from their pain. When you do the hard work of

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learning about your feelings and what it feels like to feel, you create within yourself the capacity to not only feel feelings but to communicate care, love, and compassion on a deeper and more intimate level. This is where the connection happens.

When we let the other person have their feelings and lay aside judgment, problem-solving, or advice, we get to just be with the feelings. Feelings will pass when we let ourselves feel them. When I see that you empathize with me, I see you are human too, and I don't feel as alone in my experience. When you show me sympathy, I may know you care, but I don't know you any better than I did before, and I still feel alone in my pain.

If offering empathy doesn't come easily, don't be dismayed. **Empathy is a skill that can be learned.** Even if you are not going through the same thing the other person is going through, you can tap into the human experience of pain and sit with it enough to show you care, relate, and won't judge the other person.

**To practice empathy, consider these tips:**

1. **Identify your feelings.** Look for an emotion list and get familiar with feeling words like anger, fear, sadness, and joy, and then start to broaden your vocabulary by getting more specific with feelings, such as frustrated, worried, disappointed, guilty, and ashamed. God made us to feel. Jesus showed us he felt anger, sadness, and pain. He was familiar with pain (Isaiah 53:3). Don't stifle your emotions. Get to know them.
2. **Allow others to have their feelings.** Don't try to rescue them or explain them away. Resist the urge to give advice or fix other people.
3. **Imagine what it must feel like for you to go through what the other person is going through.** Put yourself in their shoes. Has what they are going through ever happened to you? If so, how did it make you feel? Imagine that. Let yourself feel that feeling again. If you have never gone through what the other person is experiencing, then can you relate to their emotion? Have you ever felt similar feelings? If so, tell them. You can also ask, "How did you feel when that happened to you?" Sometimes it is appropriate to guess: "That must have been really scary for you."
4. **Let the other person know you see them, hear them, and are with them.** If you understand the emotion and can relate to it, tell them without making it about you. "I get it. That would make me really angry, too." Pause. Let your words sit. Don't move on too quickly. When we are uncomfortable, we tend to fill the space with words. Take a deep breath and let the other person hear your empathy. "I'm so heartbroken over this, too. It's not fair."

Let empathy build a bridge to closeness and connection. When you feel feelings **with** those you love, and not just **for** them, you open your experience of love and connection, which is what we all long for. ■

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