

Forced Empathy

What Is Forced Empathy?

Sometimes when we're hurt or frustrated, it's easy to focus on what we need the other person to understand. Forced Empathy helps you pause and step into their shoes for a moment to imagine what they might be thinking, feeling, or needing deep down.

The goal isn't to excuse hurtful behavior, but to see the situation from a new angle. One that can bring more peace, compassion, and sometimes even closeness.

Example: "She should want to talk to me"

Shawna is a caring mother who used to be very close with her daughter, Guadalupe.

They talked about everything. But since Guadalupe left for college, 500 miles away, she rarely calls.

When Shawna does get through, Guadalupe often hangs up mid-conversation.

Shawna feels hurt and confused. She keeps thinking, "*She should want to talk to me.*"

In therapy, the **Forced Empathy** exercise is presented as:

"In this exercise, you'll take on Guadalupe's role. As if I just gave you *truth serum*. That means, as Guadalupe, you can only tell the truth, nothing more, nothing less. You'll try to speak from her conscious and unconscious mind, and I'll ask you questions to help you understand what's happening from her perspective."

Shawna agrees to try.

Roleplay

Therapist - Guadalupe, I am so happy to finally meet you. Your mom has shared so many lovely things about you. As you know I am your mom's therapist and it really has been a pleasure getting to know her because she is very kind and such a lovely human being. I know things have been challenging lately given what your mom has shared with me. Can you tell me more about your relationship with your mom?

Shawna (as Guadalupe) - Yeah, she used to be someone I can rely on and I talk to her about everything. And now every time we talk on the phone. We get into arguments and I just end up hanging up

Therapist - Oh gosh, Guadalupe I can imagine that is so frustrating because she used to be someone you could really rely on.

Shawna (as Guadalupe) - Ever since my mom got divorced we used to say "It is me and her against the world"

Therapist - But now you guys get into arguments which lead you to hang up. What do you guys argue about?

Shawna (as Guadalupe) - It usually is about my Step-dad, Greg. I told my mom that I just didn't like how frugal Greg is. Then she started arguing with me. Telling me that Greg is really good with money and the only reason why we can pay for my college is because of him

Therapist - These arguments are about Greg and it sounds like you might be feeling annoyed, irritated, alone or maybe even frustrated that your mom keeps defending Greg when you call him frugal.

Shawna (as Guadalupe) - Yeah just so frustrated and alone

Therapist - Frustrated and alone. Tell me more about what makes you feel alone

Shawna (as Guadalupe) - She is not on my side anymore. She keeps defending Greg. I thought I could always count on her to be by my side.

Therapist - Your mom used to be the person you can rely on, she was always on your side. You and your mom against the world. And now when you want to tell her about how frustrated you are with your Greg instead of being on your side. She sides with Greg. You feel alone because now it is just you against the world.

Shawna (as Guadalupe) - **tears** I am all alone. I am 500 miles from my mom and she doesn't even care about me anymore. She has Greg.

Therapist - Oh gosh Guadalupe I can't help but feel so sad to hear you are all alone 500 miles away from your mom and she doesn't even care about you anymore because she has Greg. If your mom was here today, what would you want her to know?

Shawna (as Guadalupe) - I don't want to talk to you because you aren't there for me anymore. All you care about is Greg.

Therapist - You want her to know that the reason why you don't want to talk to her is because all she cares about is Greg and she isn't there for you anymore. What do you think you most need from your mom right now?

Shawna (as Guadalupe) - I need to know if it is still me and her against the world. I am so alone here

After this roleplay, Shawna realized her daughter's distance wasn't about rejection, it was about pain and loneliness. When she later reached out, she spoke with more empathy and understanding, and their relationship slowly began to heal.

How You Can Use This Technique

You can try Forced Empathy on your own to understand someone you care about but first, it helps to do some work on letting go of blame.

If you're still feeling angry or defensive, revisit the "**Blame Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA)**" exercise from Feeling Good Together by Dr. David Burns.

Once you're ready, follow these steps:

Step 1. Who do you want to feel closer to?

Write their name here: _____

Step 2. What did they say or do that upset you?

Step 3. How did you respond?

Step 4. Imagine you've just been injected with truth serum and you are now that person. You can only tell the truth, nothing but the truth.

Step 5. What are this person's values? What's important to them?

Step 6. Why do they value those things? Did something in their past shape this?

Step 7: What's their point of view about what happened?

Step 8. How do they feel about how you responded? (List only feeling words—sad, inadequate, afraid, angry, etc.)

Step 9. Why do they feel that way?

Step 10. What would they really like you to know?

Step 11. What do they most need from you right now?

Step 12. What have you learned from these steps?

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- The key is to really imagine yourself in their shoes, not to excuse or justify their behavior, but to understand their pain and needs.
- If you notice strong anger or blame coming up, pause and revisit the Blame CBA exercise.
- This can be a deep and emotional exercise. It might help to do it with a therapist.

- Forced Empathy isn't for everyone or every situation. If it doesn't fit, that's okay. There are many other ways to find understanding.

Final Note

Forced Empathy is first and foremost a method for **understanding**. Its purpose is not to control or change another person, but to see the world through their perspective with honesty and compassion. Sometimes this deeper understanding naturally leads to a shift in behavior, creating closeness or softening conflict. Other times, no immediate change in behavior occurs—and that is perfectly okay. The success of Forced Empathy lies in the process itself: cultivating empathy, clarity, and human connection, regardless of the outcome.