

# The Relationship Journal (Part 3): Empathy

## What Is Empathy?

Empathy is the ability to understand and feel how someone else might be feeling. It is a vital tool that allows us to grasp why people act or speak the way they do. By taking the time to understand the internal story the other person is telling themselves, we can often lower our own emotional reactivity.

The primary goal of empathy is simply to understand what the other person is going through. Understanding does not mean you have to agree with them, though sometimes increased understanding naturally leads to agreement.

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## How does the other person feel?

In Part 1 of the Relationship Journal, you explored your own feelings during a conflict. Now that you have clarity on your internal experience, it is time to understand how the other person was feeling.

When a person initially says or does something, they are experiencing a specific set of emotions. When you respond, those emotions often shift or intensify.

### Case Example: Sarah and James

- **Sarah:** "You don't do anything around the house."
- **James:** "I do so much around the house and I support the family with my income."

When Sarah first said, "You don't do anything around the house," she likely felt unhappy, annoyed, irritated, mad, and alone. When James responded defensively, Sarah's emotions likely compounded; she may have felt sad, anxious, inferior, inadequate, unloved, abandoned, discouraged, and furious. We can imagine Sarah having painful thoughts like, "He doesn't value what I do for the family," or "I am not good enough."

As we can see, James's words influenced Sarah to experience more negative feelings, which will naturally drive her to react more negatively toward him. This creates an escalating pattern of negative feelings for both parties.

The words we choose tremendously impact the other person's thoughts and feelings. By understanding their emotional state, we can slow down and choose our words carefully to avoid creating more pain for someone we care about.

## Humility

Reflect on your words and figure out if your response was an example of good or bad communication. To evaluate this, it helps to look at three key areas: Empathy, Assertiveness, and Respect.

Communication Skill	Good Communication	Bad Communication
<b>Empathy</b>	You acknowledge the other person's feelings and find some truth in what they said.	You ignore the other person's feelings or argue and insist they are "wrong."
<b>Assertiveness</b>	You express your feelings openly and directly.	You fail to express your feelings or express them aggressively.
<b>Respect</b>	Your attitude is respectful and caring.	Your attitude is not respectful or caring.

After looking at how your emotions impacted the other person, it can be painful to see if what you did hurt them or made the situation worse. At this moment, you need to take a pause and look honestly at what you said. Ask yourself: Did it make the problem better or worse? Was it better or worse for their willingness to listen to you, or for how they felt?

Growth comes from understanding and analyzing our mistakes, acknowledging them, and moving forward with learning to do things differently. It can be challenging to see that we made a mistake that hurts someone we care about, but this humility is essential for true connection.

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### How You Can Use This Technique (Part 3)

Please ensure you have completed Parts 1 and 2 before proceeding. If possible, working through the Relationship Journal with a therapist can be especially helpful. You may also find the book *Feeling Good Together* by David D. Burns, M.D., to be a valuable companion resource.

**Step 1.** Identify the person you would like to improve your relationship with (from Part 1).

**Step 2.** Describe the specific event or moment where conflict occurred (from Part 1).

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**Step 3.** Write down exactly what the other person did or said that upset you (from Part 1).

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**Step 4.** Write down how *they* might have felt when they did or said those things (e.g., angry, sad, rejected, anxious, disappointed).

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**Step 5.** Write down what you did or said in response. (from Part 1).

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**Step 6.** Write down how *they* felt after your response.

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**Step 7.**

Communication Skill	Good Communication	✓	Bad Communication	✓
Empathy	You acknowledge the other person's feelings and find some truth in what they said.		You ignore the other person's feelings or argue and insist they are "wrong."	

<b>Assertiveness</b>	You express your feelings openly and directly.		You fail to express your feelings or express them aggressively.	
<b>Respect</b>	Your attitude is respectful and caring.		Your attitude is not respectful or caring.	

**Step 8.** Did your response make the problem better or worse? Why?

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### What Comes Next

We have covered understanding ourselves, exploring blame, and stepping into the other person's shoes through empathy. The next step involves revising how we communicate so we can express ourselves more empathetically, assertively, and respectfully.

### Important Things to Keep in Mind

- Understanding does **not** mean agreeing
- This process is about clarity, not judging the other person.
- You only need to work on **one moment at a time**.
- If it is difficult to imagine the other person feeling vulnerable emotions, it may be helpful to revisit the Blame CBA, complete a Daily Mood Log, and/or try the Forced Empathy technique.

## **Final Note**

Empathy is a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of mutual resentment. By looking beneath the surface of the conflict and genuinely trying to grasp the other person's pain, you open the door to real, lasting connection.