

*“Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it. As busy, active, relevant [people], we want to earn our bread by making a real contribution. This means first and foremost doing something to show that our presence makes a difference. And so we ignore our greatest gift, which is our ability to enter into **solidarity** with those who suffer. . . . **Those who can sit with their fellow man, not knowing what to say but knowing that they should be there, can bring new life into a dying heart. Those who are not afraid to hold a hand in gratitude, to shed tears of grief, and to let a sigh of distress arise straight from the heart can break through paralyzing boundaries and witness the birth of a new fellowship, the fellowship of the broken.**” - Henri Nouwen*

Empathy + Community = Solidarity

Solidarity goes a step further and puts empathy into action.

How to engage in someone’s story

- What we need is humility and courage. Come with an open and humble heart.
- Abandon all assumptions and expectations. The spiritual journey is not linear. The unfolding of the human heart is artful and mysterious. We might wish the path to be orderly and predictable, but the ways of the heart are discovered in the journey.
- Each person’s healing journey will be unique to them and their story.
- We don’t need a lot of skill or to understand every detail of their story. Skill comes with practice. Kindness will take you further than skill. We don’t have to have all the answers. This takes the pressure off.
- It is only Jesus who heals.

Ways to engage in someone’s story

We need to learn to practice empathy and attunement.

Empathy

What Empathy Is and Is Not

Your emotional being won’t thrive without tender-hearted listening and care. If you are not receiving empathy, then you’ll struggle to provide it for others.

Empathy is tuning into what someone else feels, validating the bigness of it, and expressing care and compassion. It is actually getting inside the skin of their soul to experience how they feel about themselves and their life. We need to dispel the myth that empathy is walking in

someone else's shoes. Rather than walking in your shoes, I need to learn how to listen to the story you tell about what it's like in your shoes and believe you even when it doesn't match my experiences.

How to offer empathy:

- Listen patiently without interruption, including allowing for quiet pauses.
- Being curious and asking gentle probing questions that invite further self-disclosure.
- Putting fresh words to your understanding of what someone feels (being sure to vary your phrasing and not to parrot back what is shared).
- Showing warmth from your heart in your eyes, bodily posture, and nonverbal gestures.
- Resisting making judgments or giving advice.
- Inviting the person to share more (when someone seems "done" they probably aren't).

Empathy is the earnest and persevering effort to understand how someone feels. The person will feel cared for when you put energy and soft-hearted care into trying to grasp what they are experiencing.

Empathy is not compassion.

Compassion is acting in lovingkindness to meet somebody's needs, but compassion without empathy actually hurts people. It's easy to make the mistake of helping someone without understanding what they most want and need. In that case, my help may be more about what I want to do for someone and may not be experienced as truly helpful by the recipient.

Empathy is not sympathy.

To sympathize with someone is to identify with their feelings, think you feel the same way, and then share your experience with them. For friends to share sympathy with one another can be a blessing, but if you offer sympathy without empathy, then you're liable to misunderstand your friend's true emotions or switch the focus onto yourself.

Empathy is not reassurance.

Reassurance is pointing out reasons why someone doesn't need to feel their emotional distress. It's trying to cheer someone up, get them to look on the bright side or not to worry. Reassurance is cheerleading and it invalidates people's emotions. "Oh, don't feel scared about that-you'll do a great job!"

There is a situation in which reassurance is very helpful and that's when it's based on facts that the person doesn't know, like if your doctor is looking at your medical tests and insists, "You don't have cancer!"

Empathy is not pity.

To feel pity for someone is to feel bad for their suffering and to think that they are in a sorry state. Often people who are pitied feel like they are being looked down upon or judged.

With practice, your empathy can become increasingly natural and from the heart. Learning to ask for, receive, absorb, and appreciate empathy from other people is the most important thing you can do to be better at giving empathy.

Attunement

- Listen before you speak.
- Always seek to understand first. People generally speak to be understood. Even if you don't agree. Attunement is not agreement. Don't make judgements.
- Ask questions. Use validating statements.
- Look for non verbal cues. Pay attention to their facial expressions and body language.
- Pay attention to what is going on in your body. It may give clues to what they are experiencing in theirs. Are you feeling frantic or anxious, sorrow, shame ect...
- It is about building connection so the person feels safe to feel their emotional pain. The one who can be safe to feel this pain can acquire strength and resilience to mourn and grieve their losses. They can begin to move forward, begin to trust others, themselves and ultimately, God.

Resources:

<https://www.soulshpherd.org>

The Place We Find Ourselves Podcast by Adam Young