

Empathy vs. Investigation

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

Empathy is only one of many ways to connect with someone when you are in a conversation. On the Wise Heart website you can find a handout called "[Empathy vs. Not Empathy](#)". It describes common ways we try to connect with someone who is expressing difficulty or celebration. Many of these "not empathy" responses are habitual responses. You may or may not be attempting to consciously respond to your own needs or to the needs of the person in front of you. Mindful Compassionate Dialogue is about cultivating enough mindfulness and skill that you can see and respond to the aliveness in yourself and the person in front of you in the moment.

I often say that anytime someone is expressing difficulty or celebration, empathy is what is needed first. With a present moment empathic connection, actions are informed by what's really needed rather than habits or guesswork.

Responding to someone by investigating is one of the responses on the "Not Empathy" list. When investigating rather than offering empathy you might hear yourself asking a series of questions, like this: *"Why did you feel that way? What was he saying? What were you trying to do? Why didn't you just back off? When did it happen? etc."*

Offering empathy by asking about feelings and needs might sound like this: *"Are you feeling frustrated because you would like support?"; "Are you hoping for more collaboration?"; "Sounds like you're nervous about that?"; "Sounds like you are longing for a way to express your creativity, is that it?" etc.*

Because you are asking questions in both empathy and investigation, the difference might not be obvious at first. We can name distinctions along four different dimensions.

Energy: In empathy, your energy is centered. You are moving neither forward nor back, but rather simply receiving the other person. In investigating, your energy is moving forward towards something that you want to get (information).

Subject: In empathy, the subject of your attention is the person's feelings and needs in the moment. In investigating, the subject of your attention is your own ideas about what you want to know and how you think it might be helpful to know certain things.

Intention: In empathy, your intention is to connect with the other person's feelings and needs. In investigation, your intention might be to contribute, to decide whether you really want to listen or you would like to put your energy elsewhere, to meet a need for acceptance by demonstrating your skill in asking questions (which is often leading to giving advice), and/or to meet a need for comfort by engaging conversation in a way that's familiar to you.

Trust: In empathy, you trust that by being present and connected with what's alive in the moment, wisdom and skillful action will naturally arise. In investigating, you likely trust problem solving and mental clarity as a means to contribute or to meet other needs.

The purpose of making these distinctions is *not* to say that empathy is better, and you should always respond with empathy. The purpose is create enough awareness, and skill that you can consciously choose how you would like to respond in any given interaction. The further hope is that you can choose your strategies to meet your needs and respond to others' needs in direct ways. For example, if you have an indirect strategy to meet your need for acceptance by showing your competence through investigating and advice giving, my dream for you would be that you could find other direct ways to affirm that you are accepted and to accept yourself.

The more you meet your needs in conscious and direct ways the more present you can be for others. You might still investigate, but you would do so after a conscious agreement. That is, you ask the other person if it would be helpful for them or they agree to help you meet your own needs.

Practice

Take time now to look over the [“Empathy vs. Not Empathy”](#) list. Identify a couple of these that you do regularly. Reflect on recent interactions in which you responded in these ways. Identify the needs you were intending to meet with these, both for yourself and the other person. Make some guesses about what needs may have been up for the other person. Notice if there is a match between how you responded and what the other person needed.

If you have the opportunity, check in with the other person. Ask them what they were looking for in sharing with you. Often people aren't aware of the needs alive for them in sharing so it's good to give them a menu: *wanting to be heard, empathy, reassurance, information, support in problem solving, perspective, etc.* Ask if what you offered was helpful and if so, how was it helpful.