

ESTABLISHING EMPATHY WITH E.A.R.

Empathy, with its sense of connectedness and shared experience, forms a basis for good communication. This exercise will help us learn the skills of developing effective, empathic bonds with one another. Often when this empathy develops in a relationship, the problems seem to solve themselves.

Mediation: Our inclination in relationships tends toward selfishness. We want to be heard, to advance our own agenda. But empathy requires excellent listening.

“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath,” (James 1:19).

“In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise,” (Proverbs 10:19).

“He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him,” (Proverbs 18:13).

Notice James 1:19:

Swift to hear

Slow to speak

Slow to wrath

Most of the time we're:

Slow to hear

Swift to speak

Swift to wrath

Following the counsel of James takes us in the opposite direction of our inclinations. This exercise will help learn this new way of doing things.

Remember this equation: **E**mpathy = **A**sk and **R**eflect.

Two essential components to empathic listening are **asking** questions and **reflecting** what we hear.

Asking questions: The purpose of asking questions is to draw out the thoughts, feelings and opinions of the other. Try to use what, where, when and how questions, as “why?” can often sound accusatory. Make sure the questions aren't veiled accusations, as in, “What makes you act so mean all the time?”

Reflecting: The purpose of reflection is likewise to draw the person out. The point of reflecting is not to agree or disagree with the person, but to understand them. Simply put in your own words what you heard them say, asking them to confirm or correct. Again, the point is to understand. You're not going for the objective truth, but their subjective truth. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Action Step: Use “the floor” exercise to utilize these skills. Flip a coin. Whoever wins, goes first. This person gets “the floor” (you can use a piece of rug or a tile, or simply use a book or other object). While this person has the floor, the other must use the E.A.R. technique to draw out from them their view/feelings/thoughts.

Sample of what NOT to do:

~~Fred (who has the floor): I feel lonely at times in our relationship—like you’ve withdrawn from me.~~

~~Sarah: I’ve only withdrawn because you’re so pushy and demanding!~~

Notice that Sarah advanced her own agenda, talked from her own subjective experience, rather than drawing out Fred’s subjective experience.

Sample of what TO do:

Fred: I feel lonely at times in our relationship—like you’ve withdrawn from me.

Sarah: How long have you felt this way? (asking)

Fred: Just since the baby was born. I feel like he took my place in your heart.

Sarah: So you feel kind of displaced by Tommy. (reflecting)

Fred: Yeah. My parents never paid much attention to me growing up, and I feel like it’s happening all over again.

Sarah: Let me see if I understand you—me paying so much attention to Tommy reminds you of your childhood? (asking/reflecting)

Fred: Yeah.

Sarah: Was there a “Tommy” in your family? Someone who got all the attention?

Fred: Yeah, my little brother, Frank. He was my parents’ favorite. They said so.

Sarah: It must have been really hard to have your parents’ play favorites.

Fred: I felt so rejected.

Notice how quickly this conversation arrived at the root of the problem—Fred’s fear of rejection. Sarah’s effective asking and listening got to the root of the problem. Fred felt understood and “heard.” From this point the couple could work out some simple solutions to prevent Fred’s fear of rejection. And truthfully, simply being heard and understood by his wife probably accomplished this as much as any follow-up steps.

Meditation: Remember that the point of empathy is not to *agree* with the person, but to *understand* them. Once they sense that you have joined them in their subjective world, they will often begin to trust you. Once trust is in place, you will be able to correct their misconceptions.

Remember that you might be the one in error, too. “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering

yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself," (Galatians 6:1-3). Establishing empathy creates an environment which encourages responsibility-taking.

These exercises help us learn a new skill. Eventually, this becomes second nature as we "train" in doing things God's way.