

God Grace and Race: A Practice in Empathy

Five (5) Skills to Develop Empathy

Step 1 – Watch & Listen: What is the other person saying and what is their body language?

- What is happening? Ask yourself, “How does the person feel?” “How can you tell?” Listen for clues to figure it out, such as: “What do their words say? “What does their body language say?” “Does what they say match their body language?”

Step 2 – Remember: When did you feel the same way?

- Have you felt the same way? Ask yourself “When did something like this happen to me?”

Step 3 – Imagine: Imagine how you might feel in that situation. Validate the wide range of emotions that come up.

- Imagine how you might feel. Examples: “I’d feel like crying; I’d want to hit back; I’d feel very embarrassed.”

Step 4 – Ask: Ask how the person is feeling.

- Find out how the person is feeling. “Are you OK? What happened to you? How do you feel? How are you doing?”

Step 5 - Show You Care: Let them know that you care through your words and actions.

- “Listen with all your attention, spend time with them, stay with them (don’t leave), say, “I’m sorry you’re feeling this way.” Encourage them, “Let’s get help, How can I help? Do you need a hug? I’m here for you, etc.”

Things to remember during your dialogue:

- **Preserve dignity and avoid humiliation.**
- **Engage in a dialogue to understand his/her point of view and to determine his/her specific needs.**
- **Empathy is understanding not agreeing.**

Keep in mind:

- **What they ask may not be what they need. Continue the dialogue until you both understand what the true need is.**
- **Every person always has needs for autonomy, competency, and relatedness but is unlikely to express these. This may lead to mixed feelings about change.**
- **Help them to meet their needs to the extent that you are comfortable and able to. Pray, seek God's guidance.**

Also keep in mind:

- **You are responsible for your choices and actions.**
- **He/ She is responsible for his/her choices and actions.**
- **You can change some things but not others.**

Today's Practice:

You will be in groups of four. One (or more) person(s) will demonstrate empathy, another will receive empathy. At least one will observe and provide feedback using Steps 1-5 as guidance. Remember to show compassion to one another. No harsh criticism. This may be harder for some than others. We will discuss our experiences in a panel style forum. Be willing to be vulnerable.

Why Teach & Learn Empathy

The important reason for teaching and learning empathy is that individuals must be taught empathy. Defined simply as the “ability to understand and share the feeling of another,” empathy is one of those things you marvel at when you become a parent, simply because it doesn't come with the child. Nobody is just born empathetic. It must be taught. Empathy is something society has devalued and, as a result, it has “plummeted” in recent years.

The ability to have empathy is important as a foundation for caring and compassion between and among people and contributes to positive relationships in all areas of life. Empathy build community and reduces the tendency to discriminate or exclude others.

There are several examples of empathy in action in the Holy Bible. Jesus was always sensitive to the plight of others, even those he had to chastise. Matthew tells us how Jesus, “when He saw the crowds,... had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). On another occasion, Jesus observed a widow about to bury her only son. Sensing her pain (the NLT says that Jesus’ “heart overflowed with compassion”), he approached the funeral procession and resurrected the young man (Luke 7:11-16). Having lived a human life, our Lord can and dos empathize with all of our weaknesses (see Hebrews 4:15).

The word compassion describes the deep mercy of God. God is the very best at empathy: “He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). He personally feels the pain of His people: “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book” (Psalm 56:8, NLT). How comforting is it to know that God records all our tears and all our struggles! How good to remember God’s invitation to cast all our cares upon Him, “because He cares for you” (Peter 5:7).