

Four A's of Empathy

Empathy is vastly underrated and in short supply in our world. When you offer empathy to your group members it will be a huge blessing to them.

What is Empathy?

It's putting yourself in someone else's skin to feel what it's like to be that person. It's listening with an open heart, being curious and asking questions, resisting advice or cheerleading, being nonjudgmental, offering warmth and acceptance, reflecting back the emotions you're sensing, summarizing the key points you're hearing, and offering silent little prayers as you listen.

Empathy is oxygen for our souls. It's essential for spiritual growth. It promotes self-awareness, bonding in relationships, trusting God, hearing God's voice, insights on Scripture and discipleship, and love for God and other people. It's the source of effective compassion, kindness, and love. It's also a main source of wisdom and effective leadership. Empathy helps us to feel God's presence and receive the grace we need.

Perfect empathy is Jesus, the holy Son of God, setting aside the privileges of deity and heaven and taking on human flesh to live in our world, experience our life and suffering, and even take on our sin. Perfect empathy is Jesus choosing to sacrifice his life for us on the cross so that we could be forgiven, reconciled to God, and receive new life.

Here are four steps to give empathy:

1. Ask to Talk

Be curious to understand and ask open questions like, "*What would you like to share? How are you feeling? What more do you have to say about this?*"

2. Attune to Emotions

Offer active listening and mirror (reflect back) emotions using feeling words. For instance, "*It seems you feel* [stressed, anxious, frustrated, angry, discouraged, guilty, sad, alone, disappointed, rejected] ." Or you could say, "*I understand you're struggling with* _____."

3. Acknowledge Significance

Validate the bigness of people's emotions by saying something like, *"This situation is very painful for you."* Or *"Feeling _____ is a huge issue for you."*

4. Affirm Strengths

Offer encouraging words and appreciate good qualities. This is most effective when offered after empathizing with emotional struggles. Examples include, *"You're doing valuable inner work."* Or *"I admire your courage to be honest."*