

Empathy call/meeting guidelines

Here's a document on how an "Empathy Buddy" call or meet-up might go. I recommend printing this off and sticking to it quite closely at first until you discover your own rhythm and variations on this document.

The following set of instructions may lead to confusion, so if you have any questions or comments about these instructions please let me know – your feedback will help me to improve the clarity of the instructions. And please notice in your empathy call if any ideas come up that you're "not doing it right," or that the other person is "not doing it right." These are very valuable thoughts for us to work with when next we meet. Keep in mind that the person empathizing is probably learning a lot, and do what you can to support them in their learning with both honesty and kindness.

SET-UP / LOGISTICS / TIMING

- First decide how many minutes you'd like to spend on the call in total.
- Decide who will be first Speaker and who will be first Listener.
- Give the first half of the call time to the first Speaker and the second half to the second Speaker.
- Set aside a few minutes when each person finishes receiving empathy, so that you can give feedback to each other about the experience.
- Example of timing: A 40 minute call gives 15 minutes each to talk, and 5 minutes after each empathy session for giving/receiving feedback

SELF-EMPATHY / INTENTION

Before you start the call, or as soon as you get on the call, get clear on what needs are you hoping to meet on the call. (I recommend making **CONNECTION** one of the primary needs you're aiming to meet.)

EMPATHY GIVING

A quick description: *Speaker* talks about something. *Listener* periodically says back what they're hearing, with the intention of giving the *Speaker* a sense that they're "being heard" and "being met with empathy."

A more detailed description:

Speaker and *Listener*: A note on INTERRUPTION... In an empathy conversation like this you're both agreeing to interrupt and to be interrupted **in service of empathy and connection**. More on that below...

Speaker: Talk about something that's troubling you; or something you've really enjoyed lately; or even just something neutral (e.g. what you had for breakfast). You can even just talk about

whatever you're noticing in the moment and how it's affecting you – what thoughts, feelings, needs or requests are arising in response to what you're observing around you or inside yourself.

Keep in mind that you're getting a short period of empathy, and that the person working with you is practicing and learning! So whatever topic you choose, be mindful that there may not be time for you to get heard about it as fully as you'd like. This awareness might affect which topic you choose to talk about.

Listener: The Speaker will probably ask you to “**reflect back**” what you're hearing. What does this mean? It means you'll say “*What I hear you saying is...*” then literally repeat back what you heard the Speaker say. Vary your approach. Sometimes you might try repeating back word-for-word, and sometimes try just summarizing or paraphrasing. **In particular pick out any feelings or needs the Speaker mentioned and repeat those back. If you've learned about Empathy Guesses then I encourage you to also use those.** When you've finished reflecting back what you're heard say something like: “*Am I hearing you accurately?*” This is an invitation to the Speaker to resume talking and to clarify anything they don't yet feel accurately heard about.

A possible source of confusion...

I sometimes see confusion about the Listener's role in this kind of listening. One source of confusion is to confuse: “**reflecting back**” with “**reflecting on**”.

Dictionary definition of “**reflect on someone/something**” – *to give people a particular opinion of someone or something*

So, if I'm the Speaker and I ask you: “*Could you reflect **back** what you're hearing?*”

- I **AM** asking you to tell me what you heard me say.
- I'm **NOT** asking you to “reflect on” what you heard me say – i.e. I'm not asking you to express an opinion.

For some of you when first trying to do this kind of listening it might feel very strange to you. You might have a huge urge to fix the other person's problem, to give suggestions and advice, to tell stories about what this reminds you of from your life, to reassure, to coach, to express your sadness or condolences and many other responses. Look over this document (<http://www.communicationdojo.com/commoncommunicationchoices>) if you want more examples of common communication choices people make. I'm not saying that any of these choices wrong. In fact, some of them will sometimes be very welcome, and I do them often, when they're welcome. I'm even paid to do some of them (coaching, for example). However, if you're practicing empathy, then steer away from any of these choices.

If you do veer into any of these other communication choices, which is quite likely at first, don't be surprised if the Listener interrupts you and asks for you to go back to simply reflecting back what you're hearing.

Speaker: As often as you'd like, and at any point, you can interrupt yourself and say *"Would you be willing to reflect back what you've heard so far (especially any feelings and needs)?"* If the Listener reflects anything that you didn't intend, take the opportunity to clarify. I like to find a way to say this which does not imply any "wrongness" on the part of the Listener e.g. *"Your reflection about X was what I intended you to hear. Your reflection about Y was not quite what I was intending, I'd like to clarify...."*

If the Listener appears to have drifted into self-expression, advice, leading questions, or any other mode of response that does not meet your need for empathy, you can simply request that they return to reflecting what they're hearing. You can interrupt your listener if they're heading off on some track that doesn't seem like the kind of empathic listening you want and say: *"Could we go back to you reflecting back what you heard me say?"* Saying this might seem strange at first, but we're trying to create a different kind of conversation here where if you're the Speaker you get to be the center of attention and receive focused, empathic listening.

Listener: Listen for what is important to the Speaker. Why are they telling you this? What were their feelings and needs/motivations in the story they're telling you. At any point, and as often as you'd like you can interrupt and say *"Could I reflect back what I heard you say so far."* Doing this may help you stay connected if you suspect your memory is starting to fill, or if you want to get clarity. I like to present reflections in the form *"This is what I heard...[quotes of what you heard them say...especially their feelings and needs] is that what you intended me to hear?"*

Listener: A few more words on those other communication choices you might be tempted by... Imagine you've got an invisible bookshelf and put your ADVICE, OPINIONS, IDEAS, STORIES, LEADING QUESTIONS ETC. on it. You can always take them down later and speak them, when you consciously decide to take a break from empathic listening.

See what happens when you attempt to stick with just reflecting what the other person is saying, especially their **feelings** and **needs**. If you vary from that you might find that your Speaker interrupts you and asks you to go back to simply reflecting. If they ask for that, see if you can simply do it, rather than taking time explaining your reasons for doing whatever else you'd started to do.

If you feel an overwhelming urge to say/ask something other than reflecting back what you're hearing, and/or doing empathy guesses, check in with the speaker that they're open to it e.g. *"I have some advice – would you be open to it"* or *"I want to tell you what I'm thinking/feeling about this situation, would you be open to hearing that."*

FEEDBACK

Leave a few minutes during the first Speaker's time for feedback. I believe this is a very important part of the call, if the call is to support learning.

Speaker: Tell the listener what you enjoyed about their empathic listening. Try to put it in terms of observations of what they said or reflected, and how you felt at that point, and what needs were met.

For example: *"You listened really well"* is feedback, but it is not very specific in terms of telling the other person what you really most enjoyed.

Compare that with *"When you reflected back that you were hearing my need for respect, I felt a sense of relief in my body, and it really gave me a sense of clarity which I'd not had previously."*

In this case you're pointing out a specific moment which you enjoyed, which will give the listener a clearer idea what worked for you and why.

Please don't give the listener suggestions on what they could have done differently without checking in with them first e.g. *"I have some suggestions about things you could have done differently that I might have enjoyed more, would you be open to hearing them right now?"*

Listener: This is your chance to hear how it was for the other person to experience your empathic listening. I recommend that the speaker tells you first what they enjoyed, but if you also want to hear about what they did not enjoy so much you can go ahead and request that from them. You can also say something about how it was for you to give empathy. Were you nervous? Did it seem easier than last time? Do you have questions coming up to ask in class?

When the first Speaker has used their time, switch roles.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS REGARDING FUTURE CALLS WITH THE SAME PERSON

- At first you might want to try a call with someone just one time, and then try out calls with other people too.
- If you enjoyed a call with someone and would like another call, go ahead and ask for that - just be aware that they might want to try calls with other people and therefore might not have time for another call with you.
- If you've met with someone a few times and enjoyed the experience then perhaps become "empathy buddies" - all this means really is that you'll set up a regular conversation, or agree to being "on call" for each other to the best of your ability.
- During calls/meet-ups keep your timer handy and make sure the time is divided equally between you.
- If you don't want to get empathy but only want to give it, you can let the other person know that they can have all the time if they want. However, they might really want to practice giving empathy, in which case you can talk about what you most enjoyed or didn't enjoy about a recent movie you saw, for example, just so they have something to empathize with, even if there's nothing really "up" for you that you really want to be heard about.