

LISTENING WITH EMPATHY - OVERVIEW

What is Empathy?

One definition for empathy used within Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is “**being silently present with the one who is talking (or crying, or being silent, etc.)**”

Being present with the other person means you’re giving them a great deal of your focused attention, and aiming to understand both what they’re saying and what they’re experiencing.

You might reserve a little attention on yourself just to keep track, from second to second, on whether you’re still able to remain present with the other person.

Do I have to be silent when listening with empathy?

- You might be totally silent, but you might speak, or make other sounds. However, any words or sounds you use are intended either:
 - to **check** that you’re really “with” the other person, or
 - to **let them know** that you’re “with” them.
- If you are confident you’re “with” them, and the other person has a sense that you’re really “with” them, then you might have no reason to speak or make sounds.

Common verbal choices when listening with empathy

- Active or reflective listening – saying back what you’re hearing the other say:
 - paraphrase/summarize back
 - reflect back word for word
- Make “empathy guesses” – often guessing at the other person’s feelings or needs
- Ask clarifying questions.
- An important guiding principle: **EMPATHY IS NOT AGREEMENT**
 - Listening to understand does not mean you agree with the perspectives or condone the actions of the person you’re listening to.
 - To clarify this, you can say something like: *“I think I have different views and perspectives on what we’re discussing, but I really want to check I understand what your view is.”*
- A related guiding principle: **AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT IS NOT EMPATHY**
 - If you’re listening to someone mainly to ascertain what’s “right” and what’s “wrong” in what they’re saying – what you agree with and what you disagree with – then it’s very unlikely that really listening with empathy as NVC defines it.
 - If you’re doing this you’re not really “with” the other person. You’re mainly “with” your own mental commentary on what they’re saying.

Facial Expressions & Making sounds

The question often comes up "should I nod and smile and frown and do things with my eyebrows, etc. when I'm listening to someone, to show them I'm 'with them' - and should I say "hmm and mm and oh and make sighing noises or laughing noises, etc."

I don't think there's a simple answer to this question.

I told the story in class of someone who uses purring noises to convey care and attention when listening to others. Apparently this really works for some people, but for me it did not. Similarly, if I'm

expressing pain and the person listening to me makes sympathetic sighing noises, it reduces my experience that the person is fully with me as they're listening. Other people might really enjoy the sympathetic sighing noises though.

I generally like silent listening to be silent, and I enjoy reflective listening and empathy guesses too.

I recommend that you pay attention to the kinds of sounds and facial signals you're using. You can even ask a trusted friend about it "What do I do with my face when I'm listening to you? What noises do I make? Do those things give you a sense that I'm present and listening? Do you enjoy them or are the things you wish I did less?"

It's useful to know the purpose of the non-verbal signals you're giving. If you nod your head are you simply acknowledging that you're hearing what the other person is saying, or are you attempting to convey encouragement, or reassurance, or agreement, or disagreement, or shock, or something else. As we'll discuss more further into this course, these are all things that could be welcome and connecting, but are often not so welcome, and not connecting, and don't leave the person with a "met need for empathy."

Leading questions vs Clarifying questions

Clarifying questions are intended to check your understanding of what the other person said. They can be a vital tool in "being with" the person as fully as possible.

We discussed in class that there can be a kind of silent listening where you're really being present with a person, but not giving focus to what they're saying. Certainly that can be a beautiful experience, and the person you're listening to can often talk themselves into greater clarity on how they feel, what their needs are, what they want to do next, etc., without you saying a word.

Very often, however, it's going to be key that you follow the flow of meaning in what the other person is saying, in order for them to have an experience of empathy. Getting clear on what their words mean to them is then very important, so clarifying questions will be useful.

Leading questions are questions that lead the person speaking onto topics or nuances that they were not already on. They will sometimes be welcome and convey your interest and curiosity to the person you're listening to. On other cases they will disconnecting, probably because the other person wants empathy, wants you to be with them in what they're currently saying, rather than pursuing your own curiosity.

Example 1:

Person A: "My boss gave me really funny look today in a meeting. It was weird."

Person B: "Did you do something to upset her?"

Here Person B is following their own curiosity, and asking a "leading question" that takes Person A onto the topic of "doing something to upset the boss." Person A had not said anything of this kind, so this was not what I'd call a clarifying question.

Example 2:

Person A: "My boss gave me really funny look today in a meeting. It was weird."

Person B: "You've told me before that you kind of have two bosses. Was this the one who you usually feel really comfortable around?"

Here Person B is getting situated in Person A's story. They don't know who the word "boss" is referring to, so they ask a "clarifying question" to get clear on that point.

Empathy to help someone “move forward”

It's certainly true that listening to someone with empathy can often help them to move forward, to "get unstuck" and to solve apparent problems in their life.

There's a paradox of sorts here though. If you come to me and ask me to support you with something that's difficult for you in your life, I will first want to listen to you with empathy to understand as fully as possible what you're going through, what you're longing for, what you've already tried, etc. During that period of listening with empathy I will not be giving any attention to the goal of helping you to move forward or to "get unstuck" or to solve your problems. My attention will be on what you're saying and experiencing right now, even if you're describing past events or speculating about what's going to happen next.

To put it even more strongly, if I'm in anyway attempting to change your state or your situation while I'm listening to you, then I believe I will no longer be doing the kind of listening that NVC would call empathic listening. I'm no longer meeting my own need for empathy in how I'm listening to you, and there's a good chance that you will not have the experience of empathy you're looking for either. Empathy, in the way I use the word, is being present with the one speaking, just as they are, right now, with no attempt to change them in any way.

At some later point, when we both get the sense that I'm really connected to you and your situation, we might move to coming up with strategies and actions for you to take to move forward, get unstuck, solve your problems, etc. We're making a conscious decision to do that.

Nonetheless, I'll still remain ready to drop back into just listening with empathy at any point. I know that the act of problem solving, brainstorming strategies, etc., can often bring up more feelings and needs for the person I'm listening to, so I want to be able to move smoothly back and forth between empathizing and coming up with actions/strategies.

More on Reflective or Active Listening

- **Paraphrase/Summarize or Word-for-word reflection?**
 - You're aiming to give the other person the sense that you're with them, and to really have that sense yourself too – that you're really following what they're saying and experiencing. Sometimes this will be best achieved by:
 - Paraphrasing/summarizing
 - For example, if someone is giving a lot of background detail they might not want you to reflect it all, but there are certain key conclusions or points they would really enjoy hearing reflected back, since those are most important to them.
 - Word-for-word reflection
 - For example, sometimes if a person is angry they might *really* want to know that you “got” what they said, with nothing added or subtracted
- **Supportive wording you can use:**
 - *“What I’m hearing most strongly in what you just said is...”*
 - *“It’s important to me to be sure that I’m following you, is it OK with you if I summarize back what I heard so far?”*
 - *“I really want to stay connected to what you’re saying, but I’m nervous that I’m starting to lose track of some details. Could I check that I’m understanding what you’ve said so far before you say more?”*

- **What if they think I'm agreeing?** People often tell us "I don't want to do reflective listening because the other person might think I'm agreeing with them." However, you can listen with empathy and reflect back what you're hearing, without agreeing with what the other person is saying. Also, you can make sure they know that:
 - For example, if the person you are listening to includes the statement "*It's clear that you do not care about my feelings or what would be best for me*" you can say, without agreeing "*I heard you say that I do not care about your feelings or what would be best for you*" or "*I heard that it seems to you, based on what you've seen and heard, that I do not care about your feelings or what would be best for you.*"
 - Keep track of anything the other person says that you don't agree with. **You can come back to it later, rather than immediately dropping out of empathic listening to state your disagreement.**
- **Reflections can be perceived as challenges** With some people, especially if they're not familiar with reflective listening, every time you reflect what someone has said they will repeat it again, perhaps with some different words or examples of what they mean, or more evidence or data to back up what they're saying. They think you're challenging them, rather than checking your understanding. If this seems to be happening you start out by saying:
 - "I'd like to be sure that I'm understanding you. To do this I'd like to summarize back what I'm hearing. I'm not challenging you or asking you to convince me of your point of view, I'm just checking that I understood. So, what I heard was...." (then you continue with your reflection of what you heard)."
 - You might need to repeat this a number of times until the other person starts to get used to your reflective listening.

Empathy Guessing

What are empathy guesses?

Guessing at what's going on for the other person based on what you're hearing or seeing (including body/facial language, tone etc.).

Most frequently in NVC we **listen for the feelings and needs** of the other person. We might also listen for unexpressed observations, requests, and even thoughts...although focusing in on another person's thinking can often trigger strong emotions in us, and interfere our ability to empathize.

Marshall Rosenberg often taught "never hear what a person thinks *of you*." If, instead, you listen for the person's underlying humanity, their feelings and needs, you might start to see that **they are always attempting to convey their underlying feelings and needs, even when they express thoughts about you.**

Empathy guesses are questions

We usually teach first about guessing at the other person's feelings or needs.

So, when making an empathy guess about feelings, we're asking the question: **"Are you feeling X?"**

When making an empathy guess about needs, we're asking the question **"Do you have a need for Y?"**

These are template questions, but we might use different wording in our real-life empathy guesses.

Here's an example:

Person A: "You told Shuling that we're not going to come to her event!? I cannot believe you! What makes you think it's OK to do that?"

Person B: "Sounds like you're feeling pretty angry, maybe because you want to have choice about what others hear about you?"

Person A: "Yes. Exactly!"

Person B made a feeling guess (**angry**) and a need guess (**choice**). Their guess was based on their own experience of life, together with their interpretation of the words Person A spoke, and Person A's tone, volume, and other nonverbal signals. In this case the guess was accurate.

Inaccurate guesses move you toward greater understanding

Let's look at our example again:

Person A: "You told Shuling that we're not going to come to her event!? I cannot believe you! What makes you think it's OK to do that?"

Person B: "Sounds like you're feeling pretty angry, maybe because you want to have choice about what others hear about you?"

Person A: "No, it's not that at all. I just mean that I can't believe how willing you are to just tell the truth and take the consequences. You don't seem to beat yourself up about it or to worry that people will think it's not OK."

Person B: "Oh, so is it that you feel frustrated that you don't have a sense of freedom to simply be fully honest with people, and that you don't always have self-acceptance when you're honest, and you worry that other people will not have acceptance for you either?"

Person A: "Yes, that is exactly what I mean!"

In this scenario, Person B's initial guess was not true for Person A, but Person B is not troubled by that. They were not trying to be right, they were just trying to "get it." After some more clarification from Person A they can guess again, and this time their guess is accurate - now they "get it." Depending on the complexity of the situation it might take many guesses before you land on anything that really connects with the person speaking.

The intention is not to be right, to win, or to prove how good you are at guessing

- Your willingness to make a guess conveys care and curiosity about the other person, without being attached to your guess being accurate.
- The intention is to check you're "with" them, increase the degree to which you're "with" them, and to give them the sense that you're "with" them.
- If you focus on doing this "right" then your focus is on yourself, rather than on the other person.
- Attempting to "do it right" is going to run the risk that you'll be afraid of "doing it wrong." This is one of the big obstacles that prevents people from developing the powerful skill of empathy guessing.

Anchoring your guesses to their actual words

- Your guesses are based on things you've heard them say, or body//facial language, tone, volume of voice etc.
- The other person will often be more open to your guesses if you mention what you saw or heard that led to this guess
 - For example: "When you said that she's manipulating you, I got the impression that you're feeling pretty unsettled about what's happening, and wanting more transparency in your communication with her. Is that at all accurate?"

"Do you feel.... because you need...."

- This is a way of thinking, a "thought template," although you might not always use these exact words.
- It's a way of thinking and listening that removes blame from your way of hearing someone, even if they're intending for you to hear blame. We are linking a person's feeling to whether they perceive their needs as met, unmet, or not as met as they'd like.
 - **Blame** is implied by the question "**Do you feel....because I....**" or "**Do you feel....because they/she/he....**"
 - For example: "**Do you feel annoyed because I** am speaking to you this way?" is a way of asking "Am I responsible for or to blame for your annoyance"
 - No blame is implied if we link the other person's emotions to their needs:
 - Following the template, you could say: "**Do you feel annoyed because you need** respect, and your need for respect was not met when you heard what I just said to you?"
 - More "casual" language could sound like: "You sound annoyed...like you don't have a sense that you're getting the respect you want? Is that at all true, or am I misunderstanding what's going on for you?"

Empathy guessing says "I care about your reality enough to take the risk of making a guess"

Empathy guessing is a tool to pick up and put down as you wish. However, you may find that, for some people, empathy guessing can have all sorts of benefits: the other person might feel more connection to you, more connection to themselves, and they walk away with a "met need for empathy" to a much greater degree than if you'd only listened silently and/or only done reflective listening, paraphrasing, and summarizing.

It's just a guess

An empathy guess is an attempt to understand the feelings and needs of the other person. It's not an opportunity for you to TELL the other person what they are feeling or needing, like you know it as a fact.

Set out with the intention to enjoy a "yes" or a "no" to your guess - stay curious

If they say "Yes" to your guess then that instantly gives you a sense of what's going on for them.

If they say "No" then take that as meaning your guess is inaccurate, and remain curious to find out more about what's going on for them so you can better understand their feelings and needs.

It's not a competitive sport or an opportunity for you to show what a great empathizer you are: Yes, it's enjoyable and connecting when you guess accurately, but that's not ultimately the most important thing. Sincere curiosity is more important than "getting it right."

If you are mainly focused on "getting it right" you are making the whole exchange more about that than about the other person having an experience of being heard, of being met with empathy.

If you go into a display of pain or frustration when you hear a "No" that also suggests that might reduce how much of a sense of empathy the other person will have as you listen to them

You can guess about observations, requests or even thoughts

It's often useful to take a guess at what a person heard or saw that led to their current feelings, or brought up particular needs for them. Getting clear on the "triggering event(s)" might give you greater understanding and give them more clarity and empathy.

E.g. "I'm wondering if you started to feel unsettled when it looked to you like I threw my bag into the closet with more force than you expected..."

Similarly, if it sounds like there's an implied request in what they are saying, but they are not explicitly stating it, you can take a guess at what it might be

E.g. "It sounds like you'd like me to come with you tomorrow to the meeting...is that something you'd like me to do?"

Is connection growing or decreasing?

Some people might get stimulated into discomfort, irritation etc. by empathy guesses. If the guesses don't seem to be connecting it might be wise to try a different way of connecting. You can always seek more understanding of empathy guessing or other ideas for creating connection from an NVC coach, or trainer, or other practitioner.

Common Choices that don't land as Empathy

There are many other common choices we make in how we respond to people that might often be welcome and useful but might not land as empathy with them. Examples: advice, coaching, reassuring, explaining, telling your side of the story, etc.

If a person really just wants to be heard then these other choices might "fall flat" and you'll notice an absence of connection in the conversation.

Empathy is like surfing

Empathic listening is like "staying with the other person" like a surfer stays with a wave - for the fun and joy of the ride.

The surfer is not trying to take the wave somewhere, and you are not trying to take the other person somewhere. During the periods when you are listening with empathy you are not trying to take them into a different emotional state, or to a solution to their problem, or to a place of listening to what you have to say. All of those things might come next, but while you are listening with empathy your intention is simply to be with them, and to "get" what they are saying and what they are experiencing.

When can I stop listening with empathy?

When it stops being enjoyable for you. That might be after a minute or an hour or many hours.

To use the surfing metaphor again...sometimes a surfer comes to the point when they want to go eat, or sleep, or go to work, or enjoy themselves in some other way.

Sometimes they realize that a particular wave is too big or feels too dangerous for them...it's beyond their current skill level. That can sometimes happen when you try listening to someone with empathy. Listening to a certain person at a certain time might be beyond your skill level right now! But with practice you might find them easier to listen to in future.

The Gift of Empathy – Here are some of the gifts, and perhaps you can think of more?

There are many gifts for a person receiving empathy:

- A sense of relief – self-expressing without any "push back"
- Increased clarity on your own experience, increased "self-connection"
- A clearing of the mind and a foundation from which new ideas can arise
- Greater self-understanding of the internal cause of emotions - that **emotions indicate the extent to which certain needs are met or not**

There are also gifts for the "giver" of the empathy:

- A greater sense of connection to the other person, of knowing them
- Increased ability to resolve conflict
- A sense of contributing, or of giving support... When empathy is what the other person wants only giving empathy will really give you a sense that you're helping