

Empathy: A Key to Deeper and Stronger Relationships

One of the most common causes of relational breakdown, whether in the family, church or workplace, is a lack of empathy. The good news is that since each of us is made in the image of God, we have a natural capacity for developing and exercising God-like empathy. In this workshop, we will explore the significance, theology and neurology of empathy, its relationship to the biblical quality of compassion, and then lay out a simple seven-step process for improving these crucial relational abilities.

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1. Why Empathy?

2. A Lack of Empathy Inevitably Weakens Relationships

3. Three Related Concepts

- **Empathy** is generally defined as the ability to discern and vicariously experience the thoughts and feelings of another person, or more simply, *to feel what others feel*.
- **Compassion**, which builds on empathy and literally means “to suffer together,” is a deep concern for another person who is suffering, accompanied by *a strong desire to alleviate that suffering*.
- **Consolation**, which is an outworking of compassion and literally means “to be with the lonely one,” involves *action to alleviate or lessen grief, sorrow, or disappointment*.

4. The Biblical Basis for Empathy

- God himself, manifested as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the ultimate **model for empathy**: “With everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord, your Redeemer” (Isa. 54:8; see also Matt. 14:14; John 11:33-36; Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 1:3-4).
- The **motive for empathy** is to imitate God and to obey his repeated commands to show empathy toward one another: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12; see also John 13:34-35; Eph. 5:1-2; Phil. 2:1-2; 1 Pet. 3:8).
- The **method of empathy** is to discern sufferings or needs and to act quickly, personally and deliberately to alleviate or meet them: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15; see also Luke 10:33-34; Luke 15:20; 1 Cor. 12:26; Heb. 10:34).

5. The Neurology of Empathy

6. Two Types of Empathy

- **Cognitive empathy**, sometimes called “perspective-taking,” is a deliberate and conscious intellectual process whereby we observe others and use our imagination and logic to discern what they must be thinking and feeling.
- **Affective empathy**, sometimes called “emotional empathy,” is a more spontaneous process that causes us to actually feel what others are feeling, as though their emotions were contagious.

7. “One More Person”

8. Seven Ways to Exercise Empathy

- **Enlist** all of your faculties and resources
- **Move** in physically, verbally, and emotionally
- **Pray** for discernment
- **Ask** caring questions
- **Think** deliberately
- **Help** in meaningful ways
- **Yield** your convenience, pride, and resources

9. You and I Really Can Change!

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