

# Nurturing Empathy in Intimate Relationships



1

Read the article below on ways to nurture empathy in an intimate relationship.

2

Pick two ways to nurture empathy from the article that may be the hardest for you to utilize in a relationship. Explain why.

3

Explain how you might be able to get better at using these in your life.

4

Practice! Choose a way to nurture empathy to someone with whom you have a close relationship. How do you think the other person felt? How did you feel?

# 6

## Ways to Nurture Empathy in Intimate Relationships

*Empathy touches all aspects of our lives. Here's how to cultivate it.*

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Empathy is an important value, but during challenging times, it seems to be even more important. According to The Dalai Lama in his book, *Emotional Awareness*, empathy is the ability to recognize an emotion in another person. Recognizing how another person is feeling can sometimes lead to what is called “emotional resonance” or feeling what the other person is feeling, whether it is pain or pleasure. Having empathy applies to all walks of life and professions, from romance, friendships, parenting to politics.

In his early research, Carl Rogers defined empathy as perceiving the internal frame of another person. He said that maintaining an empathetic way involves being sensitive moment by moment to the changing felt meanings that flow in the other person. “It means temporarily living in the other’s life, moving about in it delicately without making judgements; it means sensing meanings of which he or she is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover totally unconscious feelings...” (p. 142). In his own research, Rogers suggested that when studying personality, we don’t give enough consideration to the concept of empathy, and its importance when wanting to affect both personality and behavior change. He found that in his clinical practice that it was a very unappreciated way of being.

Daniel Coleman has done a fair amount of research on the connection between emotional intelligence and empathy and has found that empathy is a large component of an individual’s emotional quotient (EQ). A more recent study by Beckes, Coan and Hasselmo (2013) suggested that we’re hardwired to be empathetic with those closest to us because when we’re close with someone, they become part of ourselves.



Having empathy can lead to having compassion. When you have compassion for someone else, you want to help them or relieve any suffering they're experiencing. The idea is that you cannot have compassion for another individual unless you actually recognize or understand that they're actually suffering. Studies have shown that those who lack empathy are more likely than others to commit mean-spirited crimes. In order to be mean-spirited to another person, you must have the ability to lie to yourself about whether the other person is in pain. Psychopaths can easily do this because they tend to perform heartless acts without remorse, while acting charming at the same time.

Needless to say, it's important for those in all the helping professions to be empathetic, and it's particularly important to establish this early in the relationship as this can dictate the success and outcome of the therapeutic relationship.

As humans, we sometimes we get wrapped up in our lives and simply forget empathetic practices. Empathy can be learned from those with whom we keep company, but most of us once in a while need reminders on how to be empathetic:

## *Here are 7 ways to nurture your empathy:*

1

Be self-aware. The more open you are to your own emotions, the more easily you will be attuned to the emotions and feelings of others.

2

Observe body language. Often we can tell a lot by watching other people's body language or non-verbal cues. Watch for facial expressions, hand motions, gestures and tone of voice.

3

Be in tune to someone's emotional truth. It's more important how a person says something than by what they say. Studies have shown that 90 percent of the messages we receive from other people are nonverbal.

4

Be a good listener. To be empathetic you have to really hear what the other person is telling you. To develop empathy, it's important to have all the details. Give the other person a chance to express themselves and refrain from interrupting.

5

Suspend judgement and disbelief. While listening is key to developing empathy, it's also important not to judge what the person is telling you. It's equally important not to offer tips or suggestions. When you want to fix someone else's problem, then there's a good chance you're not empathetic. If you're thinking about fixing the problem, you're not in tune to what they're going through.

6

Use reflection. While reflection is important in writing, it's also an integral part of being a healer. This is in-line with Carl Rogers therapeutic practice by clarifying back to the person what they're feeling. You might say something like, "It seems to me you're saying that your feelings are hurt."

7

Put aside your own views and values. It's important to do this so that you're completely focused on the other person's needs.

# References



Beckes, L, J.A. Coan and K. Hasselmo. (2012). "Familiarity promotes the blurring of self and other in the neural representation of threat. *Journal of Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. Vol 8. No. 6.

Dalai Lama and P. Ekman. (2008). *Emotional Awareness*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co.

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