

Elements of Empathy

Creating Empathic Connection in Conversation

PRESENCE (NON-THINKING ATTENTION)

This element of empathy is about resting your full attention on the other person while you are speaking or listening. It is present moment awareness that is not thinking or “efforting.” As listener, it is paying attention to things such as the speaker’s rhythm and tone, the spaces between the words, and visually taking in their nonverbal body language. As speaker, it is letting your words flow from awareness and presence with the listener.

UNDERSTANDING (MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES)

This element is about hearing and being heard about our thoughts, feelings, and desires.” As listener, you are trying to understand the other’s experience, from their world, their truth and reality, from their perspective. It may be listening for key words or statements in what they say, or making guesses and paraphrasing in your own words. It’s not agreeing or disagreeing with what they’re saying. It is simply acknowledging how they see things, how they feel, and what they want, without losing your own reality/perspective of what is true for you. If you are the speaker, it is expressing your truth and reality in a way that isn’t about trying to get the other person to agree, or about who’s right or wrong. It is asking the other to hear and understand your perspective.

NEEDS (AND MEETING NEEDS)

This element is about getting to the universal human needs behind the thoughts, feelings, and strategies; and looking for what would meet those needs. It is listening or speaking with the focus on, “What is important to all human beings, that we all want?” It is connecting with and deepening into needs, and seeing what strategies and requests emerge to meet them. As listener, you may hear needs being expressed in what the person is saying, or you might guess at them.

[SILENT & OUT LOUD]

Empathy can be silent and out loud, particularly as the listener. In silent empathy as the listener, you there is both pure presence and silently trying to understand the speaker’s experience, needs and what they’d like. In out loud empathy as the listener, this involves saying back or “reflecting” to the speaker what you hear in a way that you guess they would like to be heard and understood.