

# Session

# 1



# Understanding Empathy

## \* Teacher reminder:

Before beginning the session, students should be reminded of their class contract – placing particular emphasis on the importance of respect, trust and participation.

### Link to Junior Cycle SPHE Learning Outcomes:

**Learning Outcome 1.8** Students should be able to reflect on the meaning and importance of empathy and discuss ways that it can be expressed.

## Activity 1 - Understanding Empathy

### This activity will focus on:

- Explaining what empathy means.
- Describing the difference between empathy and sympathy.

### Type of Activity:

Brainstorm, Discussion.

### Materials:

Links to video resources; Definitions for Teachers.

### Method:

This activity is broken into three parts: (1) defining empathy (2) giving examples of empathy and (3) distinguishing between empathy and sympathy. It is worth spending time on this activity to ensure that students have a good grasp of the concept before moving on to the rest of the activities.

**1** Write the word 'Empathy' on the whiteboard and ask students how they would define empathy. Note any keywords on the whiteboard.

**2** Explain empathy to the class. Sample definitions are given in Box 1.

**3** Ask the students for some real-life examples of empathy. This could be a time when somebody showed empathy to them; an occasion when they showed empathy to another person; or a time they witnessed a display of empathy between other people. You may want to ask students to break into pairs and spend a few minutes with their partner coming up with some examples.

**4** Ask students whether they think empathy is different from sympathy/pity. Explain that empathy is often confused with sympathy, pity or compassion, but that these are different things. Explain the difference between Sympathy and Empathy. Some definitions/suggestions are described in Box 2.

## Box 1: Explaining Empathy

### Use definitions:

Empathy is the ability to understand what other people are feeling and thinking, and to share their feelings and emotions.

Perhaps the most famous quotation from literature on empathy comes from the novel “To Kill a Mockingbird” by Harper Lee. Atticus tells Scout: “If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.” (Lee, 1989, p. 33).

Empathy is also very often described as ‘putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes’ or ‘walking in somebody else’s shoes’.

Empathy involves understanding another person’s perspective (this includes being able to recognise that different people respond differently to things) and feeling an emotional, visceral response.

### Use examples:

Give the example of watching somebody drop something heavy on their foot and how you might wince, lift your own foot off the ground in an involuntary reaction, and maybe even feel a little flash of pain in your own foot.

Give the example of someone telling you about an experience that you yourself have gone through and how you find yourself understanding the other person’s thoughts and feelings in a very clear and profound way.

Give the example of watching a sad scene in a TV show, film or online video, and finding yourself feeling upset along with the characters.

### Use videos:

Sesame Street, ‘**Mark Ruffalo: Empathy**’ (Running Time: 2.28)

Lifehacker, ‘**The importance of empathy**’ (Running Time: 3.30)

CogSai, ‘**What is empathy?**’ (Running Time: 3.31)

## Box 2: Explaining the Difference between Empathy and Sympathy

### Use definitions:

Sympathy is a feeling of care and concern for someone else, often accompanied by a wish to see him or her better off or happier. “I feel sad for you, I wish you were feeling better”. Sympathy can often lead to empathy but it is different. It does not involve understanding or sharing the other person’s perspective or feelings.

### Use videos:

The Royal Society of Arts, ‘**Brené Brown on Empathy**’ (Running Time: 2.53)

SoulPancake, ‘**The Parking Ticket Experiment | The Science of Empathy**’ (Running Time: 6.48)



## Class Discussion:

1

**How did you feel when you showed empathy or were shown empathy?**

2

**How do you think empathy could lead to compassion and kindness for others? Why does this happen?**

3

**Is it easy or difficult to show empathy?**

*PROMPT: Does it depend on who you are showing empathy to?  
Is it easier to feel empathy for some people?*

4

**Where do you think empathy comes from?**

*PROMPT: Do you think that empathy is something  
we are born with or something we learn?*



## Teacher's Note

Psychology research shows that empathy is a key predictor of young people's helping behaviours. People with stronger empathy skills are not only more likely to help others, but also engage in more responsive and targeted helping (i.e. help in a way that better fits the person's individual needs). However, scientific evidence also shows that empathy varies across different situations. We tend to find it easier to empathise with our friends/families, and people we know and like, and find it more difficult to empathise with those we think are different from us, people we don't know, or people we don't like. While there are some genetic links to empathy, empathy is a skill that can be learned and practised over time. Some of the most important ways children learn and develop empathy include: Being shown empathy by others; Seeing empathy being modelled by others; Learning about empathy (and similar topics) in schools; Being in an environment where empathy is valued. Parents, friends and schools all play an important role in shaping young people's empathy development.

## Activity 2 – The Importance of Empathy

### This activity will focus on:

Developing an awareness of the benefits of empathy.

#### Type of Activity:

Think Pair Share - Discussion

#### Materials:

Stories of Empathy Cards.

### Method:

- 1 Assign students to pairs and give each pair one of the 'Stories of Empathy Cards' (pages 16-19), describing situations where young people treated others with or without empathy.
- 2 In their pairs, students should discuss and decide whether empathy was shown in the situation they were given.
- 3 Ask the pairs to discuss the impact that empathy or the lack of empathy had on the situation depicted. Students could use the table below to jot down their ideas.



### Class Discussion:

- 1 **How does being empathic/not being empathic change the outcome in each of these stories?**
- 2 **Does empathy make a difference?**  
*PROMPT: How does empathy impact our relationships or interactions with others?*
- 3 **Why is empathy important?**



### Session 1 Reflection

Allow the class a few minutes to reflect on their learning from the session. Ask students to identify and write down the key take home message they learned from the session.



## Learning outside the classroom

Suggest to students that they make a note of any example of empathy they come across during the week. This might include a time when somebody shows empathy to them, an example of empathy they witness in their family or amongst their friends, or examples of empathy they see online or in books. At the beginning of the next session, ask students to share their examples.

# Stories of Empathy Cards

## *Examples with Empathy*

<b>Stories of Empathy</b>	<b>Was empathy shown in this situation? Give examples to support your answer.</b>	<b>How did empathy or the lack of empathy affect the situation?</b>
<p><b>1.</b> Charlie and Luke have been friends since primary school. Charlie really likes Jenny and told Luke about this last month. At the weekend, Luke got together with Jenny behind Charlie's back. Charlie found out through another friend. When Charlie confronted Luke about it, he decided to listen to Luke's side, and understand the situation better, before deciding what to do. Luke could tell he had really hurt Charlie and felt awful about it, but explained that he had also liked Jenny for a long time and hadn't said anything because he knew Charlie liked her. Luke hadn't planned on doing anything but it turned out Jenny liked him too. Charlie could see how genuinely sorry Luke was.</p>		

## Stories of Empathy

**Was empathy shown in this situation? Give examples to support your answer.**

**How did empathy or the lack of empathy affect the situation?**

**2.** Jamie and Alex have just finished playing a football match. During the match, Jamie kept making loud comments about Alex and pointing out any mistakes Alex made on the pitch. In the changing room afterwards, Jamie continued to make jokes about Alex. Alex pulled Jamie aside and asked him to stop. Jamie said he only meant the comments as a joke and didn't think Alex would take it so seriously. Alex explained that he already felt bad about his performance and that Jamie's comments were just making him feel worse. Jamie could see that Alex was beating himself up over losing the game, and realised he had taken the jokes too far, and apologised.

**3.** Ella has been dealing with some things at home recently and hasn't been feeling fully herself. Her friend, Aisling, noticed that Ella seemed a bit down and asked her if everything was okay. Ella explained what was going on and how she was feeling. Aisling patiently listened to everything Ella had to say, without passing judgement. Aisling told Ella that she could understand how Ella must be feeling, and that she was there to listen if Ella ever needed to talk about it. Ella felt better after talking to Aisling.

## Examples without Empathy

<b>Stories of Empathy</b>	<b>Was empathy shown in this situation? Give examples to support your answer.</b>	<b>How did empathy or the lack of empathy affect the situation?</b>
<p><b>1.</b> Charlie and Luke have been friends since primary school. Charlie really likes Jenny and told Luke about this last month. At the weekend, Luke got together with Jenny behind Charlie's back. Charlie found out through another friend. When Charlie confronted Luke about it, he was really mad and told Luke that what he did was not on. Charlie felt Luke was a bad friend and couldn't understand why he would go behind his back like that. Luke told Charlie to stop over-reacting and tried to explain what happened, but Charlie didn't want to hear it. Charlie and Luke couldn't see eye to eye and ended up having a big falling out over it.</p>		
<p><b>2.</b> Jamie and Alex have just finished playing a football match. During the match, Jamie kept making loud comments about Alex and pointing out any mistakes Alex made on the pitch. In the changing room afterwards, Jamie continued to make jokes about Alex. Alex was hurt by the comments and snapped at Jamie. Jamie said he was only joking and that Alex should calm down. Jamie told the rest of the team that he hadn't realised Alex was so sensitive.</p>		



### Stories of Empathy

Was empathy shown in this situation? Give examples to support your answer.

How did empathy or the lack of empathy affect the situation?

3. Ella has been dealing with some things at home recently and hasn't been feeling fully herself. Ella decided to open up to her friend Aisling, and explain what was going on with her and how she was feeling. Aisling told Ella that she should look on the bright side because things could be a lot worse and started to change the subject. Ella felt that Aisling hadn't really listened to her, and had made her feel guilty for feeling the way that she did. Ella felt even worse after talking to Aisling.

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<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ASEFEEDBACK1>

