

# Empathy

This quality is essential for an effective communicator. It involves listening to the other person and trying to see their world from their perspective ('frame of reference'). It has been described as 'being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes'.

Empathy is not the same as sympathy. When the response of sympathy is triggered, we are often overwhelmed by the other person's emotions. The analogy of quicksand is often used. If someone is trapped in quicksand we could feel sympathetic to them and walk into the quicksand to comfort them. We are then both trapped.

With empathy we try to understand the trapped person's situation but remain rational and objective. So we throw them a rope so that they can pull themselves out.

Rogers describes empathy as: 'the ability to experience another person's world as if it were one's own, without losing the "as if". In other words it is important that we maintain a "critical distance" from the mentee. We are not them, but we are trying to understand their "frame of reference".'

Often mentors feel they are able to be empathic because they have been through a similar experience to the mentee. However, it is important to remember that although an experience may be similar, the feelings about the experience can be quite different. Confusing our own experience with that of another is known as identification.

Identification is often expressed with responses such as: 'I know exactly how you feel; I went through the same thing myself.' This is not empathy, as we are not trying to understand the other person's world: we are making assumptions.



WorkMentor

## Trust and Respect

'Trust' and 'respect' underpin all good relationships. Building trust and respect can take a lot of time and effort but it has far-reaching benefits for you and your colleagues.

The following suggestions are adapted from the ESRC Researcher Development Initiative, 2008. They provide some starting-points for reflection on good practice.

### Key principles

#### 1. Get to know your colleagues

- make time to talk to colleagues about their work and life outside work
- try to understand what they think and why. Value their viewpoint even if it is different from your own.

#### 2. Complete tasks and projects successfully

- work together on easy tasks first if you can
- be reliable. Always do what you say you are going to do.

#### 3. Communicate openly and honestly

- discuss issues as soon as they arise
- don't blame others
- try and suggest a solution or remedy if something has gone wrong
- if you don't have a solution, be willing to ask for help.

#### 4. Include colleagues in decision-making

- if people participate in decision-making they are more likely to support the decision
- keep colleagues informed of progress once decisions have been taken.

#### 5. Make use of your colleagues' expertise

- recognise your colleagues' strengths and get them involved in your research where possible. This demonstrates and builds respect.

#### 6. Be altruistic

- recognise what is important to your colleagues
- help them achieve their aims.

#### 7. Meet 'face to face'

- email and telephone have limitations as you do not have 'body language' to help you contextualise the words.

## Showing Empathy

Read each statement (in quotes) as though a young person is saying this to you. Tick the response that most communicates your attempt to view the young person's world from their unique perspective.

- "I've got something I want to say but I don't know how to say it. I can't really, you know, talk about it easily."***
  - Would it help if we went for a walk?
  - You want to talk but it feels difficult to get started.
  - Well if I don't know what it is, I can't help you, can I?
  - Is it to do with what happened earlier?
- "I've only been here a few weeks and everyone thinks I should know it all. How it all works and where to go and everything. When I say I can't remember, they all pull faces and make me feel stupid."***
  - That's not very nice of them, is it?
  - Don't worry. Everyone feels like that at first.
  - Have you tried jotting down where things go?
  - It sounds as if this is really starting to get you down.
- "I was thinking about what happened when my gran died. It was two years ago now but some days I just start crying if I think about her. I don't know why. I wasn't even that close to her really."***
  - You can't work out why you still feel so upset about your gran dying. Is that it?
  - I remember when my gran died. It hit me a lot harder than I thought it would.
  - Who else in your family is still upset?
  - It's horrible, isn't it, when you just start crying out of the blue.
- "Nobody takes me seriously. I mean I know I joke around and that, but if I try and say something – like giving my opinion – they all laugh at me, like I'm a little kid or something."***
  - Have you tried telling them how you feel?
  - Like a little kid...
  - Can you give me an example?
  - That's always the trouble with being the youngest in the family.
- "What was she meant to be doing there? Couldn't she see I wanted to get past? She didn't have to stand right there in front of me, did she? Then I ended up in trouble and she got away with it. It was her who started it."***
  - Let's be honest, most of the time it is your fault, isn't it.
  - You're angry about getting into trouble for something that didn't seem like your fault.
  - Calm down. I'm not going to listen if you're shouting.
  - Who are you in trouble with? Do you want me to talk to them?

