



The value of empathy

(and how to be better at it)

Ever gone through difficult or painful events and the response you get from your loved ones includes the phrases “at least”, “it could be worse”, “look on the bright side”, or “it will get better”? Imagine you just lost your job and you get the following response: “Look on the bright side, at least you have more free time.” Or you just went through a miscarriage and someone responds with: “At least you can fall pregnant again.” Or you were just diagnosed with a medical illness and you get told: “It could be worse, it could be terminal.”

Responding in this sympathetic way is trying to paint a silver lining around something that is painful, and although these responses hold some truth, it is usually received as dismissive, sugar-coating and feeling misunderstood.

An empathetic response creates connection whereas a sympathetic response drives disconnection. But what does it mean to show empathy? Firstly, it is the ability to take on the other person’s perspective and recognise it as their current truth (regardless of whether you see it differently). Basically, you put yourself in their shoes, full stop. Secondly, which is often the most difficult, we listen without judgement to allow understanding of their experience to be the focal point. Thirdly, we are recognising the emotions they are feeling and communicating that to them or repeating it to them. Lastly, we are expressing and feeling with the other person.

In a moment of vulnerability, we want validation, connection or even a hug with no words.

The truth is, when someone is going through something difficult, a response very seldom makes it better or fixes it. We usually do not want advice in a moment of vulnerability; we want validation, connection or even a hug with no words. We want the truth of our experience to be seen, heard and understood, and not compared with a worst-case scenario, or being told what to do to fix it.

Next time someone is in a “dark hole”, try sitting with them in the dark hole and responding with “I can just imagine,” or “I know how painful this feels; it’s okay to feel it and I’m here for you.” This creates more meaning for that person in the moment.

As American social psychologist and bestselling author Brené Brown says, “Being empathic is choosing to be vulnerable with that person because in order to connect with someone’s pain you are connecting with something within yourself that knows that feeling.”

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