



# Life Relationship Notes

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## empathy

The Important Role of Empathy in Communication

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Empathy combines two important capacities: to analyze and to sympathize, to use our heads and to use our hearts. Our analytical capacities involve collecting facts and observing conditions. We look at a problem, we break it down into its causes, and we propose solutions. That's analyzing. Sympathizing is feeling for another person. It is feeling the pain of someone who is suffering or feeling the anger of a person in rage. Analyzing and sympathizing are the twin engines of empathy. One without the other is fine, but their true power is found in combination. We need to love with both our head and our heart to empathize. When we empathize, we put aside our expectation that another should be like us. We accept the fact that he or she has brought a unique personality into our relationship.

While the word "empathy" is never used in the Bible, it is, in a sense, what the whole Gospel message is about. The apostle Paul encouraged empathy in Hebrews when he said: "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (Hebrews 13:3). He also said, "We who are not strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves" (Romans 15:1).

The best model of empathy is our Lord himself. If Jesus Christ had been merely sympathetic to our plight, he would have watched our struggles from afar, shaking his head and feeling bad. If he had been merely analytical, he would have told us exactly what to do, stripping us of our freedom and solving all our problems for us. Instead, the Son of God chose to become one of us (see John 1:14; Luke 1:32; Philippians 2:7; Colossians 1:15, 1 Timothy 2:5).

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## Practicing empathy

**Listen.** Listen carefully with the desire to accurately understand. The better you listen, the more likely they are to open up their hearts and reveal their feelings.

**Observe.** Many people do not feel comfortable sharing their feelings with another person. Even though they may not say it aloud, you may notice a change in their behavior. Through being observant, you will likely be more sensitive to others.

**Use your imagination.** Imagine: 'If I were in this situation, how would I feel? How would I respond? What would I need?'

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