



# Seven Steps to Empathy

By Ken Sande | [www.rw360.org](http://www.rw360.org)

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Without empathy, it's hard to have real relationship.

The good news is that since each of us is made in the image of God, we have a natural capacity for developing and exercising God-like empathy.

Are you practicing this marvelous gift in your life? If not, here is an acrostic that can help you become a more empathetic person:

- E**nlist all of your faculties
- M**ove in physically, verbally and emotionally
- P**ray for discernment
- A**sk caring questions
- T**hink deliberately
- H**elp in meaningful ways
- Y**ield your convenience, pride and resources

I'll unpack each of these steps in detail later in this post, but first I'd like to provide a visual illustration of empathy and then explain the significance, theology and neurology of this crucial relational ability.

## Young Thai Man

**Scan the QR code with your mobile device to view the video clip.**

What emotions did you observe in the various people in this clip? Did you see the humiliation, hopelessness, frustration and loneliness that the young man saw in the people around him? Did you see his kindness, gentleness, patience, hope and joy... and how his actions infused others with similar feelings? That's the fruit of empathy.



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## A Lack of Empathy Inevitably Weakens Relationship

Unfortunately, this is not how people always treat one another. After mediating hundreds of conflicts, I've noticed that a lack of empathy is often a key contributor to family, church and employment breakdowns. For example...

**In failing marriages** I often heard wives say, "We have no emotional connection whatsoever. He's simply oblivious to my feelings and concerns. I just can't take it anymore; I need someone who can actually relate to me."

**When teens withdrew or rebelled**, they would often say, "My parents just don't get me. I try and try to share my thoughts and struggles, but all they ever do is ignore me or lecture me."

**When pastors lost the hearts of their congregations**, members would frequently tell me, "He knows what to say from the pulpit, but he's not a shepherd. He rarely senses when people are hurting and when he does, he just doesn't know how to show real compassion."

**And in many employment disputes**, I encountered a deep discouragement in employees who complained that their supervisors showed little concern for them as people and simply kept pushing the company's productivity goals.

Of course, I've heard similar statements in reverse from husbands, parents, pastors and supervisors who were grieved by a similar lack of empathy in the people they led. But because leaders' strengths and weaknesses are magnified by their authority, their lack of empathy usually stood out more vividly and caused a greater amount of damage to a relationship.

Regardless of where this deficiency rested, I've heard far too many people in broken relationships echo the words of Psalm 69:20: "I looked for... comforters, but I found none."

## Three Related Concepts

Before we look at ways to improve empathy, allow me to define three closely related concepts:

- **Empathy** is generally defined as the ability to discern and vicariously experience the thoughts and feelings of another person, or more simply, to *feel what others feel*.
- **Compassion**, which builds on empathy and literally means "to suffer together," is a deep concern for another person who is suffering, accompanied by a *strong desire to alleviate that suffering*.
- **Consolation**, which is an outworking of compassion and literally means "to be with the lonely one," involves *action to alleviate or lessen grief, sorrow or disappointment*.

Since these terms are closely related, for the sake of brevity I'm going to roll them together throughout this article and refer to them collectively as "empathy."

## Two Warring Women

To illustrate these combined qualities, let's look at a short video clip from Stepmom. Jackie (played by Susan Sarandon) is divorced and dying of cancer. Isabel (played by Julia Roberts) has married Jackie's former husband. The two women have fought constantly over Jackie's children through most of the movie. But in this scene near the end of the movie, their relationship is transformed as they finally show empathy for one another.



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What emotions did you observe in Jackie? In Isabel? What was it that brought the wall down between them and helped each of them to feel what the other person was feeling? What indicated that they wanted to somehow alleviate the other person's suffering? How did they console each other? What conveyed the most compelling message: their words or their tone of voice, tears and body language? What can you learn from this clip?

## The Biblical Basis for Empathy

Empathy is taught and encouraged throughout the Bible. For example:

- God himself, manifested as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the ultimate **model** for empathy: "With everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the Lord, your Redeemer" (Isa. 54:8; See also Matt. 14:14; John 11:33-36; Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 1:3-4).
- The **motive** for empathy is to imitate God and to obey his repeated commands to show empathy toward one another: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience" (Col. 3:12; See also John 13:34-35; Eph. 5:1-2; Phil. 2:1-2; 1 Pet. 3:8).
- The **method** of empathy is to discern sufferings or needs and to act quickly, personally and deliberately to alleviate or meet them: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15; See also Luke 10:33-34; Luke 15:20; 1 Cor. 12:26; Heb. 10:34).

As these and many other passages show, empathy is not optional for those who follow Christ. It is rooted in the very nature of God, who expects all who follow him to cultivate and model this essential relational quality.



## The Neurology of Empathy

By God's design, all human beings are "wired" for empathy. We are barely beginning to understand how he has done this, but one of the most intriguing theories involves a concept known as "mirror neurons."

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) has revealed that when we observe actions or emotions in other people, certain neurons in our own brains light up as if we are the ones experiencing the event or the emotion. As a result, we "feel" another person's experience as if we are actually going through it ourselves. This "mirroring" can cause us to react the same way as other people are reacting. This may be why one crying baby can set a whole room of babies crying.

There are many other factors involved in empathy, both spiritual and neurological. But whatever it is that triggers empathy, it is firmly wired into human nature by our Creator. Therefore it is manifested in both unsaved and saved people. We see this repeatedly in Scripture (e.g., when Pharaoh's daughter rescued a crying baby from the Nile (Exod. 2:6) or the Christians in Antioch collected an offering to send to the famine-stricken church in Judea (Acts 11:28-29)).

We also see this gracious quality lived out on a macro scale in the world around us. Examples include the massive benevolent responses to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. (2005), by Hurricane Hannah in Haiti (2008) and by more recent tornadoes and earthquakes around the world.

When people are suffering, others with tender hearts naturally feel their pain and respond with comfort and support. That's how God designed us ... and expects us to behave as his image-bearers.

## Two Types of Empathy

Behavioral scientists often describe two types of empathy.

- **Cognitive empathy**, sometimes called "perspective-taking," is a deliberate and conscious intellectual process whereby we observe others and use our imagination and logic to discern what they must be thinking and feeling.
- **Affective empathy**, sometimes called "emotional empathy," is a more spontaneous process that causes us to actually feel what others are feeling, as though their emotions were contagious.

Two historical figures illustrate these types of empathy.

Shortly after becoming Prime Minister of Great Britain, **Winston Churchill** learned that his predecessor, Neville Chamberlain was dying. Although Churchill was generally insensitive to the emotions of others, he realized that Chamberlain was probably overwhelmed with guilt since his appeasement policies with Hitler had opened the door for World War II.

Exercising **cognitive empathy**, Churchill ordered his aides to withhold bad news on the war from Chamberlain and instead send him only good news as he lived out the last months of his life.

The **Book of Ruth** provides an example of **affective empathy**. When Ruth's husband and father-in-law died in Moab, her devastated mother-in-law, Naomi, decided to return to Israel. Realizing Ruth would be an outcast in Israel, Naomi urged her to stay in her homeland and find a new husband among her own people. Sensing the sorrow and hopelessness Naomi was feeling, Ruth repeatedly wept with her and steadfastly refused to leave her (Ruth 1:9-14), voicing some of the most moving words of consolation recorded in Scripture:

*Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you" (Ruth 1:16-17).*

## Seven Ways to Exercise Empathy

Studies have shown that it is possible to deliberately improve both cognitive and affective empathy. In fact, as you improve your ability to exercise one type of empathy, you'll usually find that the other type comes more naturally as well.

Here is a brief introduction to seven ways you can enhance your empathy. To assist you in remembering and practicing steps, I've organized them into an acrostic called EMPATHY.

### I. Enlist all of your faculties and resources

Empathy is enhanced when you focus all of your senses, abilities and resources on understanding other people. Use your **time**; slow down, relax, show that you're happy to give others all the time they need. Use your **ears**; listen not only to others' words but also to their tone of voice, which often communicates the most accurate information.

Use your **eyes**; note the emotions in others' eyes and on their faces (excitement, sadness, uncertainty, weariness, etc.). Pay attention to their posture and body language (slumping, pacing, cringing, etc.), which often says what their words don't.

Empathy is also enhanced when you make full use of your **memory** ("When have I gone through something like this?"), your **imagination** ("How would I feel if I was in her shoes?"), and your **instincts** ("What is he hiding, fearing or really wanting to say?").

## 2. Move in physically, verbally and emotionally

People seldom share deep concerns quickly and fully. Instead, they usually offer hints of their problems or concerns and watch what you do with them (like laying down a hand of cards one at a time). To draw people out, you need to send convincing signals that you care and want to help.

There are many ways you can do this. **Physically**, you can sit down close to someone to show you want to hear them out. You can lean toward them to show interest and concern. Look at them (not at a football game or your cell phone) to demonstrate focus. Use touch in appropriate ways; a warm hand shake with both hands, a gentle touch on the arm, or even a friendly hug can send a convincing message of friendship and concern.

You can also move in **verbally** to show that you are really listening and caring (“That must have been hard.” “I’m so sorry.” “Please tell me more.”) Don’t shy away because you can’t solve the problem or come up with perfect words. Sometime the best thing to say is simply, “I don’t know what to say but I’m so glad you told me.” Remember that your tone of voice and facial expression will often convey more meaning than your words.

You can also move in **emotionally**, mirroring what others are feeling (a smile for joy, a look of concern for suffering, or tears that match theirs ... just as Jonathan’s tears mirrored those of David when he was driven into exile, 1 Sam. 20:41).

## 3. Pray for discernment

Our sinful nature makes us selfish, lazy and uncaring. Therefore, we need divine assistance to practice genuine empathy.

Pray daily that God would open your eyes to see the depths of his empathy and compassion, which are revealed so powerfully in the gospel of Christ. Then pray he would transform your heart to make it more like Jesus’ heart, filled with selfless, sacrificial and effectual love.

When you actually engage people, pray that God would give you patience, discernment, understanding and wisdom as they unveil their experiences and emotions to you. Then ask God to show you ways to serve and console them in practical and meaningful ways.

## 4. Ask caring questions

Empathy does not have to be a guessing game. When in doubt, ask others to explain their situations, concerns and feelings. This is often the simplest and most effective way to understand another person.

For example, when a friend of mine lost his job, I asked him, “How do you feel?” He cheerfully responded, “I’m sure God will take care of me.” To which I responded, “I know that’s what you believe, but how do you actually feel?” After a surprised pause, his shoulders slumped and with sadness in his voice he said, “I feel hurt and rejected.” That transparent comment opened the way for a very deep, heart-to-heart conversation.

So I encourage you to develop the habit of going beyond the traditional, "How are you?" and ask questions like these: "How are you, REALLY?" "What happened then?" "How do you feel about that?" "What do you plan to do next?" "You're my friend, so I really want to help you; what can I do today that would make this situation easier to handle?"

## 5. Think deliberately

God has given you an incredibly powerful mind that is capable of discernment, emotion, logic, imagination and planning. Your ability to show empathy will skyrocket whenever you bring all of these abilities to bear at the same time.

You can do this by consciously asking yourself these kinds of questions as you talk with others: "What is she feeling right now?" "Why?" "How would I feel if I was in her shoes?" "When have I had a similar experience?" "How did I feel?" "How can I show that I understand and care?" "What should I not say right now?"

One of the best ways to develop the ability to think like this during actual conversations is to practice thinking like this as you read a book, watch a movie or watch strangers across a room (one of my favorite pastimes when I sit in airports). The more you practice thinking like this in detached situations, the more naturally these thought processes will occur in up close and personal situations.

## 6. Help in meaningful ways

Once you discern what others are experiencing and feeling, true empathy will show itself in concrete action. This doesn't mean you necessarily solve others' problem, but rather that you are with them as they go through those problems (see Isa. 43:1-2). As Henri Nouwen wrote, "To console does not mean to take away the pain but rather to be there and say, 'You are not alone, I am with you. Together we can carry the burden.'"

Sometimes this will call for words of encouragement or consolation. When you can't do this face-to-face, a phone call, a handwritten note or an email can be meaningful. I will never forget the friends who quickly communicated their concern and love for me when I was going through a trial, whether the loss of my parents or brother, setbacks at work or major health crises.

Sometimes actions will speak louder than words. Just being nearby can send a powerful message, even if you don't know what to say. My dad was like this. Although he was a very bright man, he sometimes had a difficult time articulating his concerns and feelings. But I'll never forget the many times he just dropped by to show his deep interest in my life.

And of course, we should always be open to the opportunities God gives us to share our resources with those in need. This may include the poor, those who are sick or in prison, or people whose lives have been turned upside down through the loss of a job or a natural disaster (Matt. 25:37-40).



## 7. Yield your convenience, pride and resources

True empathy can be very costly. It often requires that we give up our time and convenience, alter our personal agendas, let go of our expectations, change our priorities or share our resources sacrificially. It can also require that we kill our pride, renounce personal prejudices or let go of resentment and unforgiveness (see Luke 6:27-36 ; Rom. 12:20-21).

For example, after South Africa finally renounced Apartheid, one of their highest police officials, who had aggressively suppressed Black Africans for decades, dedicated his life to healing the wounds of his nation. As he traveled around the country, he always carried a small bowl and towel. At the beginning of every talk he gave, he knelt at the feet of at least one Black person and washed his or her feet, symbolizing his repentance and imitating the humility of Christ (John 13:3-5).

His words of repentance were very meaningful. But his willingness to yield his pride and dignity as he knelt on the floor conveyed an empathy that connected deeply with countless people whose hearts were finally freed from the hurts and the hatreds of the past.

### One More Person

Many of the elements of empathy are vividly illustrated in this scene in *Schindler's List*. Oskar Schindler (played by Liam Neeson) was a German businessman who employed Jews during World War II to profit from their misfortune. Toward the end of the war his heart changed and he used his money to bribe Nazis to allow him to save 1,100 of his workers from execution. During his final parting with these workers, he realizes that he could have helped many others if he had acted earlier. As you watch this scene, note how empathy is flowing in both directions.



**Scan the QR code with your mobile device to view the video clip.**

What emotions did you observe in Oskar? Why did he feel that way? How did he fail to live out the key elements of **EMPATHY** prior to this scene? (**E**nlist your faculties, **M**ove in, **P**ray, **A**sk, **T**hink, **H**elp, **Y**ield)? How did he begin to live out these elements toward the end of the war?

What emotions did you observe in the Jewish workers? Why did they feel that way? How did the Jewish workers live out the seven elements of **EMPATHY**? What can you learn from their example?

## You and I Really Can Change

Some people seem to have a natural inclination and ability to exercise these seven qualities. For others, like me, they are not natural and therefore require deliberate work. In fact, it's only been in the past few years that I've begun to make a deliberate, conscious effort to become a more consistently empathetic person.

I'm often clumsy and can still be clueless at times. At other times I say words that miss the mark. And it can still be hard for me to yield my pride and agenda. But bit by bit, God is changing me, fulfilling his promise to steadily conform me into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2Cor. 3:18).

If you've given yourself to Christ, that promise is yours as well. Now give yourself to practicing these skills in your daily relationships and see how God deepens and enriches all of your relationships.

*Ken Sande*

### Reflection Questions

- How did each of these individuals model empathy: Boaz (Ruth 2:8-16), Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:12-17; 1Sam. 20:41) Esther (Esther 8:3-6), Jesus (Matt. 14:14; Luke 17:13; John 11:32-35).
- Think of someone you know who is highly empathetic. Which of the seven qualities described above does he or she demonstrate most consistently? How does that impact other people?
- Think of a person to whom you'd like to show greater empathy. Pick just two or three of the seven qualities of empathy and start practicing them with that person this week. Add one additional quality each week and notice how your relationship changes in the next two months.

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