

# The Power of Empathy

Use this animated short of [Dr. Brené Brown](#) to explore the differences between empathy and sympathy. This activity allows youth to explore their **Ways of Relating** through practicing empathy with others.

## Why This Matters

- Connecting with and supporting others is essential. That's why empathy—the ability to identify with other people's struggles and support them—is so important.
- Sympathy minimizes someone's pain, whereas empathy connects us to their pain. Empathy helps us discover what we have in common with each other.
- Empathy is a skill that develops by practicing giving and receiving empathy.

## Getting Started

- Materials: video + audio for group
- Time: 20-30 minutes
- This activity works best with groups that are comfortable with each other.
- Count the number of youth ahead of time so that you know you can form groups of two or three.
- Preview the 3-minute video created by the Royal Society of the Arts, which is available on [Vimeo](#) or [YouTube](#) or [download the MP4](#) (<https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-shorts/2013/12/Brene-Brown-on-Empathy>).

## How To Use It

- 1) Explain that the purpose of this activity is to learn about and practice empathy, an important skill for supporting friends and family.
- 2) Have a discussion about the concept of empathy compared to sympathy. What comes to mind when you think of the word sympathy (feeling sorry, providing comfort or assurance)? What comes to mind when you think of the word empathy (feeling with people, putting yourself in their shoes)? If you share a struggle, worry or challenge, how do you want people to respond (“that sucks”, “I’ve been there”, “it could be worse”. “why don’t you...”, “it sounds like...”, “I’m sorry”).
- 3) Watch the 3-minute video.
- 4) Discuss the four attributes of empathy that Brown references:
  - To be able to see the world as others see it. This requires putting your own “stuff” aside to see the situation through someone else’s eyes.
  - To be nonjudgmental. Judgment of another person’s situation discounts the experience and is an attempt to protect ourselves from the pain of the situation.
  - To understand another person’s feelings. We have to be in touch with our own feelings in order to understand someone else’s.
  - To communicate your understanding of that person’s feelings. Rather than saying, “At least you...” or “It could be worse...” try, “I’ve been there, and that really hurts,” or, “It sounds like you are in a hard place now. Tell me more about it.”
- 5) Explain to youth that Brown defines empathy as a skill that develops by practicing giving and receiving empathy. It’s a skill, and it takes practice. Have youth spend the next 10-15 minutes practicing empathy with the following activity.
- 6) Have youth get in groups of three (or pairs). Each person in the group will take turns having each role. Describe the three roles:
  - One person is the fox, someone willing to talk about a challenge they are having in their life. (Depending

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on the maturity of the group, consider giving youth scenarios. Potential scenarios might include: receiving a low grade on a test, the loss of a pet, conflict with friends, etc.)

- The other person is the bear who listens and resists the urge to offer advice or try to fix it. The bear might say phrases like: “It sounds like...” “Thank you for sharing with me.”
- The third person is the reindeer who offers silver linings: “At least...”.

7) Debrief the activity with some of these questions:

- Foxes, what did it feel like to have someone listen to you?
- Bears, was it challenging to not give advice? What were some of your responses to the fox?
- Reindeers, how did it feel to offer silver linings?
- For everyone: What is challenging about expressing empathy rather than sympathy? What do you see as the main differences between sympathy and empathy? What surprised you most about the activity? How will this activity affect your actions moving forward?

## Take It Further

- Use this activity with adult staff to build their own empathy skills. Have a discussion about how to be empathetic with youth when providing feedback.
- To learn more about The Power of Empathy, you can watch [Brown’s complete RSA lecture](#). You can also watch her very popular TED Talk on [The Power of Vulnerability](#).