



Connecting with Others: The Importance of Empathy and Listening

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For many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how much value we place on feeling connected to others, with the loss of social freedoms associated with lockdowns leading to a diverse set of mental health challenges. Empathy represents one of the most important ways we are able as humans to connect and feel close to others, but few of us are trained in understanding how to be more empathic. For teachers, however, the nature of our relationships with students, fellow staff members, and parents is undoubtedly influential on how successful we are in our role, as well as how much enjoyment and fulfilment we experience in the process.

The father of person-centred psychotherapy, Carl Rogers, defined empathy (1959) as being able to 'perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the 'as if' condition.' Crucial to the notion of being empathic therefore is actively seeking to understand the other person's frame of reference, which means to 'look out of their window' and to see things as they do given the context of their experiences. Thus, being truly empathic is always about the other person and their frame of reference, not ours. A common mistake occurs when we try to display empathy by considering how we would feel in the speaker's shoes, but we inadvertently do so from our frame of reference and perspective, not theirs. Being empathic also means we must put aside our views and values, gently enter another's private world without judgement or prejudice, and be a confident companion (Rogers, 1975). By seeking to understand the speaker from their frame of reference, we are communicating that we are trying to understand them at a deeper level and that we care. Hence, empathy is essential for developing stronger and healthier social connections and relationships that have meaning and purpose (Demetriou, 2018).

Our ability to empathise has both genetic and environmental components, although research suggests that the genetic contribution decreases and environmental influence increases with age (Knafo and Plomin, 2006). Children who grow up in neglectful or abusive environments are more likely to develop weaker, more unstable emotional relationships as adults and an inability to empathise (Bowlby, 1969), while the healthiness of the attachment relationship between child and primary caregivers has also been shown to affect empathic abilities (Britton and Fuendeling, 2005). Thus, there is strong evidence that the ability to empathise can be learned and hence we can all improve our empathic skills. However, becoming more empathic cannot occur without developing our active listening skills. In active listening, we are not passive and simply hearing; we focus completely on the speaker and it is active because the listener has a role to play, namely to consciously decide to concentrate on and really understand what is being said, as well as the meanings and feelings behind the words. Examples of how we can improve our active listening skills include:



- **Listen with more than the ears.** Pay attention to the speaker's body language, what is not being said or is only partially said, and notice any inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal messages.
- **Avoid interrupting.** It is tempting to rehearse what we may say in response and interrupt in case we forget. By doing this, however, the focus is no longer on the speaker, so we should be patient and not prematurely cut them off with questions, comments, or corrections.
- **Let them know we are listening through our verbal responses.** We can do this using skills such as paraphrasing (putting in our own words the message the speaker is trying to communicate), reflecting (expressing what the speaker has said in their own words and reflecting back the content and feelings associated with the message), and summarising (concisely bringing together what the speaker has said to ensure accuracy of the main messages).
- **Let them know we are listening through our non-verbal responses.** As far as possible, we should remain neutral and calm in outward appearance (even if we do not feel it) and be aware of how our non-verbal cues may suggest judgements, as this may affect the speaker's emotions and willingness to continue sharing. Positive examples include smiling, nodding, and making eye contact.
- **Listen to ourselves and how we might feel in their situation.** It is vital that we do this, however, from the speaker's frame of reference, not ours. We should be cautious too about sharing our own 'similar' experiences, as we risk invalidating, undermining, or devaluing their experiences by doing so.
- **Avoid solving the speaker's problem in our head.** We cannot do this and listen to the speaker simultaneously, and we should allow the speaker the dignity of making their own decisions and not take the problem from them. Giving unsolicited advice can also act as a significant barrier to listening and it is often not what people want when choosing to share things.

By actively listening to others, working hard to understand their frame of reference, and asking effective questions, we can create an environment where the speaker feels safe and listened to. Many of us like to believe that we are good listeners, but it is important to recognise that we are not always the best judge of this, as we rarely have access to knowledge on how our listening skills impact the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of other people. In the Johari window model (Figure 1), negative behaviours we exhibit when listening and responding could represent one of our 'blind spots', and thus only honest feedback from others can help us with this. Our self-awareness can also be raised by completing empathy or listening 'questionnaires. Regardless of how we obtain feedback on our empathic and listening skills, it is important to note that both can be improved with practice, and I believe that they are vital not only for the effective teacher, but for developing stronger, healthier, and deeper relationships in our lives.

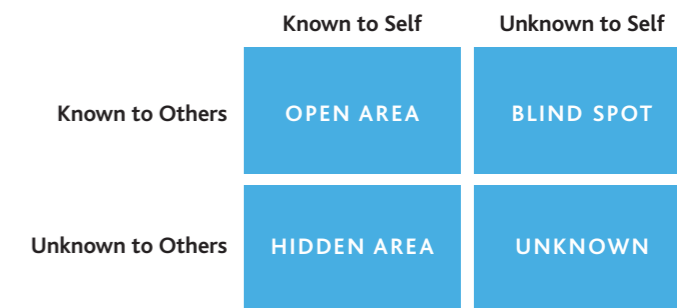


Figure 1: The Johari window model (Luft and Ingham, 1955)

¹E.g. Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (psychology-tools.com); How Good Are Your Listening Skills? – From MindTools.com

Empathy questionnaire: <https://psychology-tools.com/test/toronto-empathy-questionnaire>

Listening questionnaire: <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/listening-quiz.htm>