

# Understanding Others

## What to Know

Empathy is the ability to share and understand the emotions of others. Empathy involves self-awareness and the ability to separate your feelings from others' feelings. Empathy is different from sympathy, which involves feeling concern for others' suffering and wanting to help. There are three types of empathy.

1. **Affective empathy** is the ability to share the emotions of others. You may feel scared or hurt within yourself when someone else is scared or in pain.
2. **Cognitive empathy** is the ability to understand the emotions of others. You understand how someone is feeling, but you don't share their feelings.
3. **Emotional regulation** is the ability to regulate your emotions, no matter how anyone else is feeling.

Empathy is important because it helps you understand how others are feeling so you can respond appropriately.

## What to Do

In each situation circle the response you think is the correct answer. There might be more than one answer!

**Practice predicting feelings.** Imagine yourself in this situation: A friend invites you to a party. You learn all the girls in your group were invited—except for Kristen. How do you think Kristen will feel if she finds out?

- a. angry
- b. sad
- c. hurt
- d. excluded
- e. confused
- f. nervous
- g. embarrassed
- h. indifferent

You may have put yourself in Kristen's shoes and imagined how you would feel. Most people in this situation would feel angry, sad, hurt, and excluded.

What if Kristen asks, "Are you going to Natalie's party?" Knowing she wasn't invited may influence how you respond. What would you say?

- a. "Yes, I'm going—are you?"
- b. "Yes, I'm going, but I feel awkward telling you. Is it true she didn't invite you?"
- c. "Yes, everyone's going!"
- d. "Of course, I'm going! It's going to be the best party of the year!"
- e. "Yes. I'm sorry you weren't invited. I don't think Natalie meant to hurt your feelings. I heard her parents only allowed her to ask a few people."

What else might you say to Kristen?

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Did you consider Kristen's feelings and answer b or e? Being able to predict how others might feel is a part of emotional intelligence (EQ). It's a skill you can develop with practice.

**Read body language.** Sometimes you get information about a situation from what a person *doesn't* say. Part of EQ is reading the signals people send through their facial expressions and body language.

Kristen approaches you, and she looks upset. She asks, "Are you going to Natalie's party?" Write down some ways her facial expression and other body language might tell you she's upset.

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What if Kristen approaches you looking cheerful and says, "I heard Natalie is having a party this weekend. Are you going?" Based on her body language, you might think, "She doesn't know she wasn't invited." If you have good EQ, you might feel bad about telling Kristen you're going to the party when you know she's the only

one who wasn't invited. Even though Kristen needs to manage her own emotions, you may feel empathy for her. How you respond can make a difference in how she feels. Write down what you'd say.

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**Make sense of reactions.** When you understand others, you can predict what they might feel and how they may react. Imagine yourself in this situation: In homeroom first thing in the morning, your friend Carlos is smiling, friendly, and energized. Later that afternoon, he looks really upset. He starts to cry. What do you think happened?

- a. He had a fight with a friend at lunch, and now they're not talking.
- b. He got an "A" on his math exam.
- c. He just found out he didn't make the final cut for the baseball team.
- d. The science teacher assigned a lot of homework.
- e. He just had a bad day.

You probably ruled out option "b" because EQ tells you your friend's reaction looks more like failing an exam! If Carlos had a bad day or a lot of homework, he might seem stressed or tired. If you understand what happened, you can imagine how Carlos might feel ("He'll feel awful if I say that to him!"). You can relate to how he might react ("Oh, I understand why he's so upset!").

What would you say to Carlos?

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Here's what you can do to improve your understanding of others.

**1. Watch.** You can sense what others feel just by watching them. Scientists believe brain cells called "mirror neurons" activate in the same way whether you do something yourself or watch another person do it. Try one of these activities:

- Look at people when you're out in public. Identify how others might feel based on their body language, facial expressions, and what they're doing.
- Read books or watch movies that have realistic portrayals of emotions, paying attention to how the characters feel and act. Try to understand why they feel the way they do and predict what they will do next. See if you can explain why a character did what they did.

What did you do? \_\_\_\_\_

What did you notice? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

Was this activity easy or hard? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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**2. Listen.** If you're good at understanding others, you're probably a good listener. Research shows the better someone listens, the more connected they feel with the person who is talking. Sometimes you might be so busy thinking of what you want to say you don't listen closely. Here are some ways to build good listening skills:

- Practice listening in everyday conversations and pay attention to what others are saying. Train yourself to listen more than talk.
- Pay attention to a story and the feelings involved. When a friend tells you something, imagine how they felt. Show you're trying to understand your friend's experience. You might say, "Oh, that must have been so much fun!" or "That must be upsetting." You might even find you can predict what your friend will say next.
- Interview a loved one about a special time in their life. Imagine what the experience was like for them. Ask them to tell you more about how they felt and why.

What did you do? \_\_\_\_\_

What did you notice? \_\_\_\_\_

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Was this activity easy or hard? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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**3. Be compassionate.** After you build your skills in understanding others, how can you use that knowledge? You may use it to help and support people. This is called compassion, and it helps strengthen your relationships. Try these ways to be more compassionate:

- Ask others what they need. If a friend is going through a hard time, ask what you can do to help. Think about what you'd want in the same situation and offer to do something similar.
- Show an interest in others. Be curious about the people you know that shows you want to understand them better. You might ask about what they like to do, or about their ideas and opinions.
- Be kind. When you hear gossip or mean teasing, imagine how it would feel to be on the receiving end. This can help you tune in to others' feelings and stop you from joining in.
- Say "hi" to someone who is sitting alone or offer to help a homebound neighbor.

What did you do? \_\_\_\_\_

What did you notice? \_\_\_\_\_

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Was this activity easy or hard? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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Did this activity help you understand others a little bit better? Why or why not?

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