

# Conversations

## MAKING MEANING OUT OF TRAUMA

REAL PEOPLE. REAL STORIES. *with* DIANA KENDROS

In this *Trauma Talk Blog*, we look at how empathy, the ability to understand the feelings of others, is the foundation of mental health. It might also be said to be the pillar that supports and sustains human relationships, the family and civil society.

One way empathy manifests is in morality, including what we call in the West, the Golden Rule, which takes many forms in many different cultures.

But it boils down to roughly, "Treat other people the way you would like to be treated." So we think we could justly say that, as empathy can be said to affect every aspect of our human experience, it rightly deserves to be the focus of our column this month.

Empathy can also be said to be the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of another person, animal, or fictional character.

Developing empathy is crucial for establishing relationships and behaving compassionately. It involves experiencing another person's point of view, rather than just one's own, and enables 'helping behaviors' that come from within, rather than being imposed upon us by someone else.

With the pandemic and other recent events we have all been forced to adjust to what has been called *the new normal*, a perspective that could be said to be more isolated, egocentric and 'tribal,' rather than altruistic and other-centered. Some surveys indicate that empathy is on the decline in the United States and elsewhere. This is a source of concern.

We believe that such a critical component of good mental health and a healthy society should draw our thoughtful attentions.

We hope that our experts in this column bring you insights and good advice.

*Stay Safe and Healthy,  
Diana and Jan*

Empathy During COVID-19

## *What Do You Do When?* YOU NEED EMPATHY

**Empathy** is a term we use for the ability to understand other people's feelings as if we were having them ourselves. ... **Sympathy** refers to the ability to take part in someone else's feelings, mostly by feeling sorrowful about their misfortune.



by Susan Milligan, CHAM, CRCR, Patient Experience Director, Ensemble Health Partners

Fear, frustration, panic, anger, confusion ... we have all been dealing with these emotions (and many others) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Acting with Empathy During COVID-19

Before sharing insight on acting with empathy for patients, co-workers and yourself, I want to make one thing clear: I am amazed at the courage of our teams. If courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act despite the fear, then how could I use any other term to describe our teams?

All over the country, our associates have faced these circumstances with poise and professionalism, and I will always remember that we acted courageously and were leaders in selfless acts, despite the fear and anxiety we are experiencing ourselves.

## Featured Doctor

Brené Brown on Empathy vs. Sympathy  
Empathy never starts with the words, "At least..."

# Psychology Today

When your loved one shares a painful experience, do you try to lighten the moment?





Casandra Brené Brown PhD, LMSW is an American professor, lecturer, author, and podcast host. Brown holds the Brené Brown Endowed Chair at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work and is a visiting professor in management at McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin.

Our brains are wired to run from pain—including emotional pain—whether it is ours or someone else's. Brown points out in this video that empathy rarely starts with the words, "At least..." and that oftentimes, the best response is, "I don't know what to say, but I am really glad you told me."

[Psychology Today Article](#)

When your loved one says they are upset with you, have you found yourself justifying your words or actions, only to have your partner become more upset?

Despite your best intentions, you may be suffering from a lack of empathy.

The following cartoon short from University of Houston researcher and Daring Greatly (2012) author Brené Brown's RSA talk in 2013 explains the difference:



[More About Brené Brown](#)

Brown explains that empathy is a skill that strengthens with practice and encourages people to both give and receive it often. By receiving empathy, not only do we understand how good it feels to be heard and accepted, we also come to better understand the strength and courage it takes to be vulnerable and share that need for empathy in the first place.

## 4 Defining Attributes of Empathy

Brown references nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman's four attributes of empathy:

Theresa Wiseman RGN BSc(Hons)(Psy) RCNT RNT PGDE. Nurse Tutor, Bloomsbury and Islington College of

### #1. Perspective Taking

To be able to see the world as others see it—this requires putting our stuff aside to see the situation through the eyes of a loved one.

### #2. Stay out of Judgment

To be nonjudgmental—judgement of another person's situation discounts the experience and is an attempt to protect ourselves from the pain of the situation.

### #3. Recognize Emotion

To understand another person's feelings—we need to be in touch with our personal feelings in order to understand someone else's. This also requires putting aside "us" to focus on our loved one.

Habits for Wellbeing  
Theresa Wiseman

### Nursing and Midwifery, London, England.



### #4. Communicate Emotion

To communicate our understanding of that person's feelings—rather than saying, "At least..." or "It could be worse..." try, "I've been there, and that really hurts," or (to quote an example from Brown) "It sounds like you are in a hard place now. Tell me more about it."

## Video Corner

### What's the Difference Between Empathy and Sympathy?

Tori Olds, a therapist at Deep Eddy Psychotherapy in Austin, TX, talks about really showing up for someone to bridge an emotional gap for them and how this integration is actually what we aim to create within ourselves.

"I typically guide clients in slowing down and "being with" themselves more fully and without shame."



Tori Olds, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist  
Individual Psychologist

"I try to template this level of attentiveness through my own emotional engagement and respect for my clients





and their experience.

In this way, clients and I can collaborate in an atmosphere of openness and safety to address whatever is on their hearts or minds."

Learn More About Dr. Olds

## Your Empathy Toolkit #1

### Definition

Empathy is the ability to identify and understand another person's situations and feelings.

Sympathy refers to the feelings of sorrow and pity for someone else's misfortune.

### Understanding

Empathy implies that one can understand another person's situation.

Sympathy does not imply that one can understand another person's situation.

### Experience

Empathy implies that one has a similar experience in the past.

Sympathy implies that one cannot understand the situation due to lack of experience.

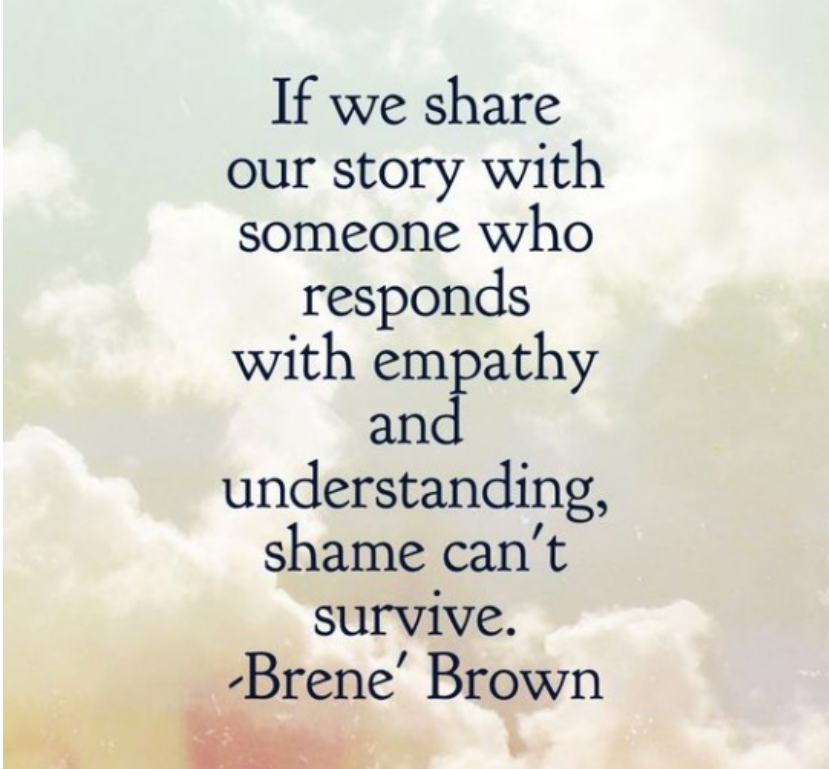
### Feelings

Empathy evokes feelings such as understanding, acceptance, and concern.

## EMPATHY VERSUS SYMPATHY

Ability to identify and understand another person's situations and feelings	Feelings of sorrow and pity for someone else's misfortune
Can understand another's situation	Cannot understand another's situation
May have similar experience in the past	Does not have similar experience
Understanding and acceptance are evoked	Pity, sorrow and concern are evoked

Sympathy evokes feelings such as pity, sorrow, and compassion.



If we share  
our story with  
someone who  
responds  
with empathy  
and  
understanding,  
shame can't  
survive.  
-Brene' Brown

*Please stay safe and healthy!*  
*Diana and Jan*

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