

Empathy: The Art of Listening

We generally want to respond when people speak to us. For example, someone says, “I’m so tired, I couldn’t get any of my work done.” Some typical responses below are often said with the best of intentions, but can unknowingly create disconnection.

These are called empathy blockers.

- One-Upping: “Oh, you had one assignment due today? I had three.”
- Comparing: “I’m so tired myself. I couldn’t get any of my homework done either.”
- Discounting: “Okay, but shouldn’t you just be glad you got into this school?”
- Analyzing: “You know, this seems to be a pattern of yours.”
- Changing the topic: “That’s too bad. Anyway, do you want to go to a movie later?”
- Unrequested Advice / Fixing: “Maybe you should get more sleep.” “Maybe you should take some vitamins.” “Maybe you should....”
- Educating: “There’s a good book you should get on sleep and productivity.”
- Consoling: “That’s too bad. I’m sure things will go better tomorrow.”

Things We Can Say To Express Empathy

- “I hear you.” Said with sincerity, this meets a person’s need to be heard.
- “Tell me more.” Said with sincerity, this shows you are really interested.
- “Wow!/Yikes!” Said softly, this reassures someone you are still listening.
- “That’s a lot.” This acknowledges that something had an impact, no small matter.
- “I don’t know what to say, but I appreciate you telling me.”

When someone is in a difficult place, this may be all you have to say.

- If appropriate, one can say, “let me know if there is anything I can do to support you.” Saying this validates their concern.
- “Would you like any feedback?” is an invitation to share, which can be accepted or not.

~ Empathy Is Being Interested Rather Than Interesting ~