

Brené Brown on Empathy vs. Sympathy

Empathy never starts with the words, "At least..."

by - Kate Thieda MS, LPCA, NCC / from *Psychology Today*

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

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:

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." Fixing your loved one's problem is not often what is needed, nor is it necessarily your job or even within your ability to do so. Sharing a listening, caring ear *is* something most people can do. When we feel heard, cared about, and understood, we also feel loved, accepted, and as if we belong.

In *I Thought it Was Just Me (But It Isn't)* (2008), Brown references nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman's four attributes of empathy:

- To be able to see the world as others see it—This requires putting your own "stuff" aside to see the situation through your loved one's eyes.
- 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.
- To understand another person's feelings—We have to be in touch with our own feelings in order to understand someone else's. Again, this requires putting your own "stuff" aside to focus on your loved one.
- 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 (to quote an example from Brown) "It sounds like you are in a hard place now. Tell me more about it."

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.