



# **SIX STEPS FOR DEVELOPING EMPATHY IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS**

by Adam Sicinski

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Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?

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Students would listen to a real life story that introduces a human hardship followed by insight and strength necessary to overcome. The lesson lies in the humanity of the experience, delivering the ultimate goal of empathy; we are one. Students may respond to the experience with visual art drawings, creating a greeting card, posting on instagram or other social media. Teaching tolerance through Identity, Diversity, Justice and Action are the corner stone of *Perspectives for a Diverse America* online learning curriculum (K-12).

## **What Does it Mean to Have Empathy?**

**Empathy has the ability to accurately experience another person's internal world, emotional pain, and inner conflicts.** To do this, we must come to understand a person's true feelings, thoughts and experiences, which are typically governed by their beliefs and the perspectives they hold of themselves, others, and the world around them.

**It's only when we come to know a person's point of view, their internal drives, and their emotional tendencies, can we truly understand them at a deep enough level for empathy to arise.**

Without empathy, there can be no understanding, and without understanding, we don't ever truly know the people we interact with.





Developing empathy is, of course, no walk in the park. It takes a lot of work and focused effort. Some would even say that developing empathy just ain't possible. You're either born with empathy, or you're not. I would, however, disagree.

Yes, it's undoubtedly true that some people are naturally more attuned to other people's thoughts, needs, and feelings. However, this is also something that can be practiced and developed over time — just like any other soft skill.

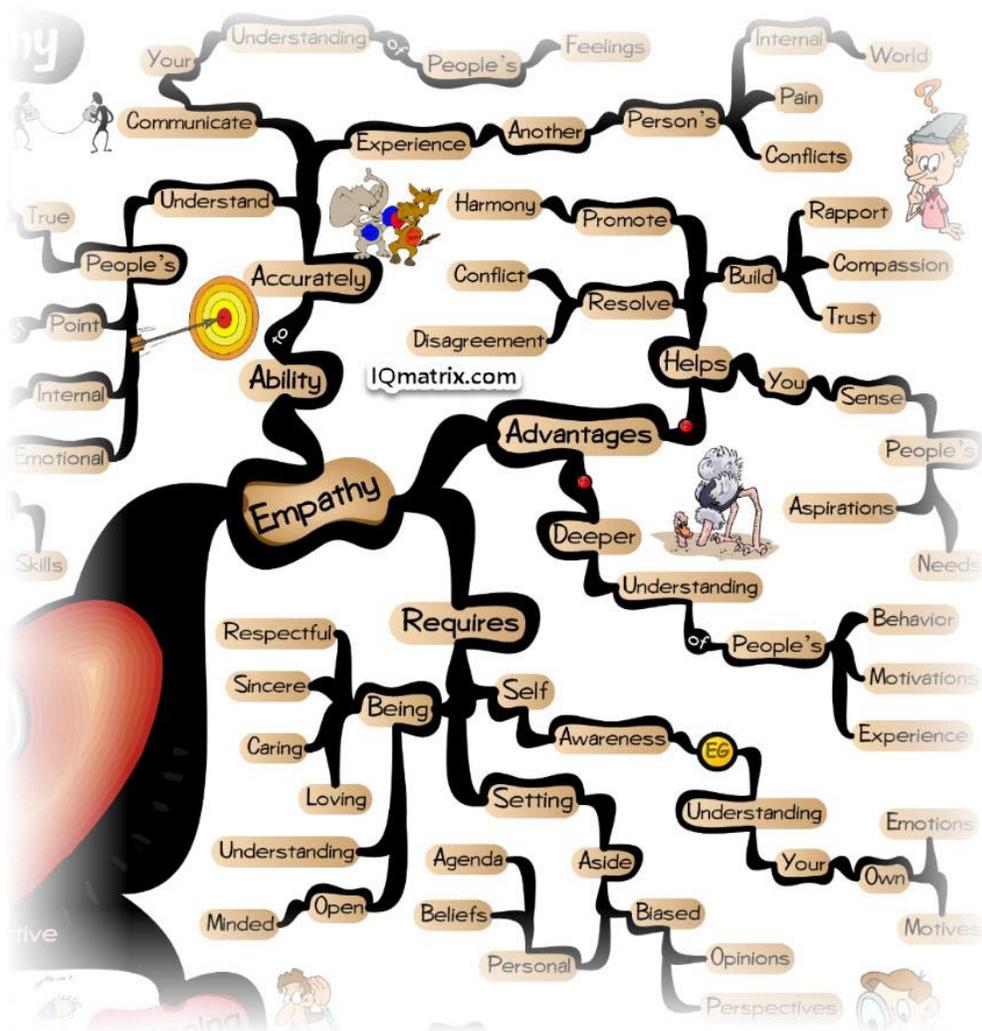
For instance, developing empathy requires being respectful, sincere, loving and caring. **It requires having an interest in other people's lives and being open-minded to the differences that make each person unique.** These are all virtues that we can practice and nurture over time.

In addition to this, developing empathy requires setting aside your own personal biases, opinions, agenda, and beliefs, and choosing instead to accept people wholeheartedly as they are, for who they are — warts, flaws, and all.

Empathy doesn't judge, ridicule, or demean. It's open and accepting of everyone regardless of their [personal beliefs](#) and opinions. However, empathy isn't only about the other person. It's also about you. It's about having the self-awareness needed to better understand yourself, your motives and your own emotions.

Therefore, true empathy works two ways. First, **it's about having the ability to empathize with others, and secondly, it's about having a deep understanding of yourself and the effect you have on others through your words, actions and behavior.**





## The Advantages of Developing Empathy

So, what are the advantages of developing empathy?

Well, for starters, when you practice empathy you naturally develop a deeper understanding of other people's behavior, motivations, and life experience. As a result, you are better able to sense people's aspirations and needs. This subsequently helps you to connect and relate to people at a deeper level, which naturally helps you form tighter bonds and build lasting relationships.

With higher levels of rapport, there is more trust between you and the other person. As a result, there is a greater level of harmony, which helps you resolve





conflict and disagreements far more quickly and readily. In such instances, active listening is, of course, at the heart of developing empathy.

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## Developing Empathy Through Active Listening

One of the best ways to begin developing your empathy skills comes through the art of active listening.

Active listening requires being very attentive and fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively hearing the message of the speaker. However, this ain't just about concentration. **It's also about remembering and understanding the message and then responding appropriately to what is being said.**

When you're listening actively, you are fully focused and paying attention to the other person's message. However, this too has numerous layers.

For instance, a person who practices active listening pays attention not only to the message, but also to the person's tone of voice, volume, pace, and whether or not they emphasize certain words. This is important as the true message isn't always found in words, but in how the words are being expressed.

A deeper layer still accounts for non-verbal cues that include facial expressions, body language and even breathing patterns. It's important to account for these things because what the person says and how they say things might actually mask their true feelings and insecurities.

**Non-verbal cues can reveal a great deal about what a person is thinking and feeling.** Pay particular attention as to whether the person uses open body language, or whether they appear to be closed and guarded.

Take notice also of their eye contact. When they communicate, do they look you in the eye, or do they avert their gaze? If they look away while communicating, then it's possible that they are feeling uncomfortable or trying to mask certain feelings.

As an active listener, you must also be aware of your non-verbal language. Pay attention to your body language. Specifically, use open and inviting body





language that makes the other person feel comfortable and secure in your presence. Also, use good eye contact, but be careful not to use it in a threatening and provocative way. **Gentle eye contact that draws the person into the conversation is the way to go.**

Another area to pay attention to are your facial gestures. Make sure to **use involving facial gestures to show the other person that you are engaged and listening to their every word.** This will help show the other person that you are interested in what they are saying.

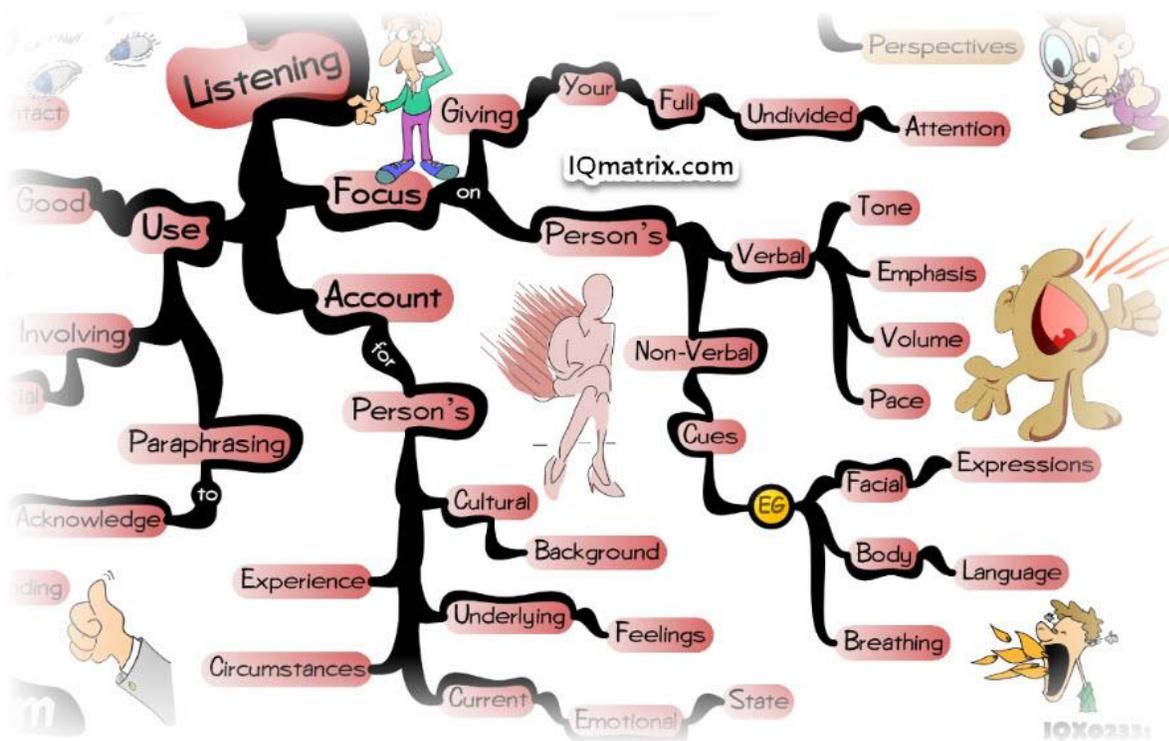
Active listening is, however, not only about listening but also about communication. Specifically, it's about communicating your understanding of the other person's message. This can be achieved through paraphrasing what the other person has said. Paraphrasing helps you acknowledge that you're on the same page.

Finally, while listening actively, make sure to account for a person's underlying feelings, their current emotional state-of-mind, their knowledge and experience in certain situations, and the circumstances you find yourself in.

A person's communication and willingness to divulge certain feelings, opinions and information are dependent upon the various factors mentioned above. For instance, **when a person is in a positive state-of-mind they will be more willing to share and communicate freely.** However, when they are in a negative state-of-mind, they may hold certain feelings and information back to protect their [self-esteem](#).

Accounting for all these factors will help you to get to the heart of a person's message and the underlying feelings and emotions accompanying that message. And that essentially is at the heart of empathy. For more information about active listening, please read [Social Skills 101](#).





## Six-Steps for Developing Empathy

Now that you have familiarized yourself with how to develop your active listening skills, it's time to walk through a six-step process on how to develop empathy.

Developing empathy ain't easy. It will take work and effort on your part. In fact, you will need to be more conscious and aware of yourself, others, and of your shared surroundings. Moreover, **you will need to go the extra mile to dig deeper into a person's psychological world to truly understand them at a core level of awareness.**

Initially, as you work through the following six steps, you may struggle a little. At the beginning stages, empathy will take a significant amount of concentration on your part. And it will be easy to get sidetracked and fall back into old habits. But, I would urge you to resist the temptation.

To develop empathy, you must [commit yourself](#) to working through each of these six steps. No skipping steps, or changing the order of the process. It's rather important that you initially follow the process of steps exactly how they are listed





below. Then, after a while, when you start feeling comfortable with each step you can begin to adjust and adapt them to each person and situation.

With that said, let's outline the six steps to help you develop empathy.

## **Step 1: Imagine Yourself in the Other Person's Shoes**

The first step to developing empathy is to **imagine yourself as the other person**. In other words, imagine yourself in their shoes, **living their life through their unique experiences**.

Every person brings to each experience a unique set of beliefs, [values](#), and perspectives that influence their opinions and ultimately how they view and interpret the world. These beliefs, for instance, influence what they say, [what they fear](#), and subsequently what they avoid doing. They influence who they trust, how they trust, and how they respond to [problems](#) and [adversity](#).

Moreover, they bring to each experience emotional baggage that affects their state-of-mind. **These emotions change how they see you, how they look at themselves, and ultimately how they deal with events and circumstances.**

When we ask the question:

### **How would I feel if I were in their shoes?**

We must take into account all the factors mentioned above to help us get an understanding of their true feelings, intentions, and motives.

It's, therefore, paramount when interacting with another person to take all these factors into consideration. Use them to help shift how you read another person in the context of the situation they find themselves in.

## **Step 2: Investigate Underlying Feelings**

Having put yourself in the other person's shoes, it's time now to dig a little deeper to uncover the person's feelings and underlying intentions.

To do this, you will need to subtly insert some variations of following questions into your conversation.

### **What's on your mind?**





## How do you feel about that?

### Please tell me more about...?

These questions are gentle probing questions that help you get a sense of their current state-of-mind and how it's affecting them at the present moment.

Developing empathy requires this kind of gentle probing. You need to **ask questions that encourage the other person to open up to you — to express their true feelings and intentions.** Only in this way can you truly understand who they are and how they feel at this particular moment.

However, questions alone won't reveal all the answers you are seeking. Unless you have a very close relationship or friendship with another person, then they will likely hold things back. **They won't divulge their true feelings to protect their self-esteem.**

Everyone comes bundled with a [set of insecurities](#) that prevent them from being around others as they desire to be. As a result, people will often hold back from expressing their true feelings and intentions to protect themselves from judgment, [criticism](#), [embarrassment](#), and ridicule. You must, therefore, never solely rely on the answers they give you, but rather challenge yourself to probe deeper. **Ask:**

**How does this person feel? Why?**

**Could they be hiding their true feelings? Why?**

**What am I hearing the other person say?**

**What am I seeing the other person do?**

What a person says, how they say things, and what they do must be in-sync. In other words, everything must be aligned to one purpose or intention. If there are inconsistencies regarding what they say and the actions they take, then you will know that there is an imbalance there. And where there's imbalance, the other person is probably holding back their true feelings and intentions.

A person who regularly practices empathy trains themselves to identify these underlying feelings and intentions that are normally protected and hidden from view.





Use the insights you gather here to probe a little further — to encourage the other person to open up to you about their true feelings and experiences.

### **Step 3: Identify with the Person’s Experience**

When the other person starts feeling comfortable in your presence, they will be more willing and able to express themselves. In other words, they will become vulnerable, which will help them to express their true feelings and intentions.

When they reach this stage, it’s paramount that you **take the time to identify with their experiences and the feelings and emotions that accompany those experiences.**

You might, of course, not always be able to relate to another person’s experiences. However, you can still imagine yourself living through those experiences and the accompanying feelings and emotions. Or, you may possibly have similar experiences that you can relate back to the circumstances they are currently going through.

Either way, it’s crucial that you **consistently convey to the other person that you understand where they are coming from.** But, if for any reason you are having difficulty relating to what they are saying, then it’s important to probe a little deeper. Encourage the other person to talk and express how they’re feeling and how these circumstances are affecting their state-of-mind, life, and relationships.

### **Step 4: Verify the Accuracy of What You’re Hearing**

While interacting with the other person, it’s important to keep in mind that people are rarely 100 percent honest and real in social situations.

Don’t get me wrong though. This doesn’t mean that people are intentionally deceiving you. They are merely protecting their feelings and masking their insecurities. It’s akin to putting on a mask that hides our facial expressions. The mask, for instance, has a smiley face, but behind the mask, we are [worried](#) and petrified.

Given this, it’s essential that you don’t take things at face value. **Think objectively about what the other person is saying and doing.** It’s very possible that what you are hearing or observing may just be a fragment of the





truth. The person may very well be holding things back. And that's okay. They are just protecting their self-esteem.

Empathy requires being acutely aware and attuned to what the other person is saying and doing. And it also requires being very objective and critically questioning the accuracy of what you are hearing and observing. Only in this way will you truly understand a person's underlying feelings, motives, and intentions. And only in this way are you able to provide them with the support they need to move forward in an empowered way.

## Step 5: Offer Your Support

This is where you provide the other person with emotional support.

By this stage, you should have a relatively good understanding of the other person's state-of-mind and what they potentially need in this situation. **This, of course, doesn't mean that you have the green light to give the other person unsolicited advice.** It instead means to be there for them emotionally, physically, mentally, and maybe even spiritually.

**Be gentle, and encourage the other person to find the strength they need to move forward.** This strength, of course, comes from within. And the best way to do this is to **ask questions that encourage the other person to take the initiative to move past the [obstacles](#) and [fears](#) that are holding them back.**

This is very much a [life coaching approach](#), where the life coach empowers their client through the use of questions. These questions help their client find their own answers to life's problems and circumstances. It's, therefore, not the coach giving them the answers, but rather **the coach asking the right kind of questions that help their client to find the answers for themselves.**

## Step 6: Practice Emotional Detachment

The one drawback to practicing empathy is that it's very easy to get emotionally drawn into the other person's world, where their problems, pain, and experiences essentially become our problems, pain, and experiences. This can very quickly [become overwhelming](#) and interfere with our quality of life and our ability to help others.



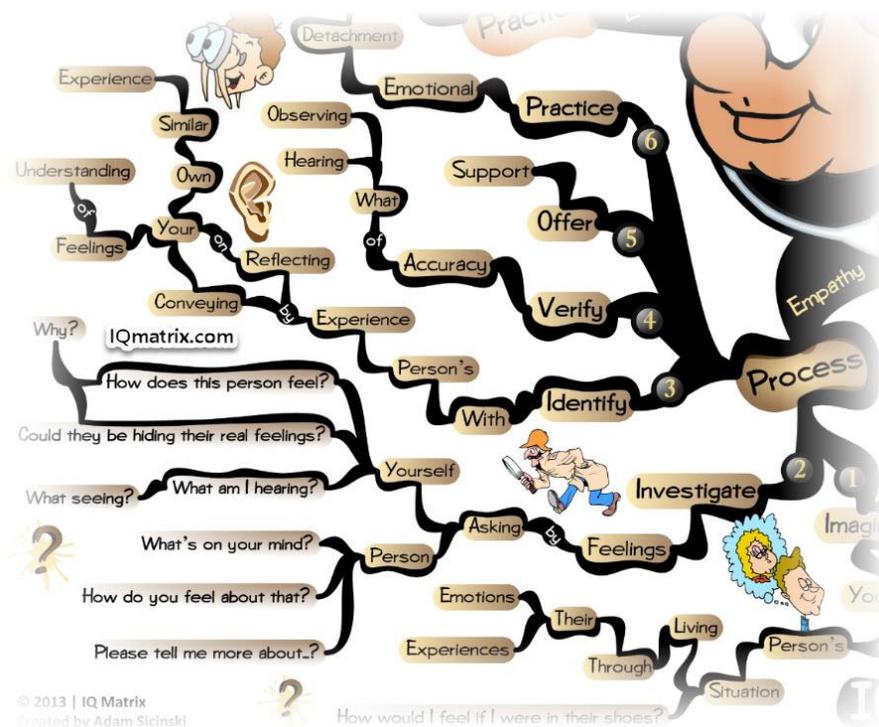
Given this, it's important that we detach emotionally from other people's experiences. This, of course, won't be easy, but it's something that we must do to maintain a healthy state-of-mind.

I understand this person's pain...

I will not allow their pain to become my pain...

One way to do this is to **assign yourself to play different roles throughout the day**. For instance, when you're practicing empathy, you can play the role of a carer who looks after the emotional well-being of those around them.

However, once you have removed yourself from that situation, you immediately switch to another role of being a parent, leader, manager, spouse, or whatever that may be for you. In other words, you become a different person in each role. In this way, one role won't interfere with how you conduct yourself in other roles throughout the day.



## Guidelines for Practicing Empathy





Having gone through the six-step process for developing empathy, you are now ready to begin practicing empathy as you interact with others throughout the day.

It's, of course, important to follow the six steps outlined above. Consistently **work through them until each of these steps becomes instinctive** — where you're no longer thinking about practicing empathy. Empathy rather becomes part of your nature.

It goes without saying that **to develop deep levels of empathy you need to have a genuine interest in other people**. You need to be interested in them, in their life, and in their well-being. Without a genuine interest in others, you will struggle to develop empathy over the long-run.

You, of course, might not always be in a position where you're constantly interacting with other people. This subsequently makes it difficult to work on developing your empathy skills. However, with a little creativity, you can practice empathy from the comfort of your lounge chair.

I'm, of course, referring to your television set. Yes, **you can actually practice empathy while watching television**. All it takes is to use the guidelines and suggestions outlined here to practice empathizing with people in the media or even with characters in a movie.

You, of course, won't be able to interact with these characters, but you can certainly empathize with them and with the difficulties and struggles they are working through. The practice you get here you can then transfer into the real world at a later time when interacting with friends, colleagues, family, and strangers.

While interacting with other people, be sure to **encourage them to share their feelings**. This isn't always easy, but if you're genuine, sincere, and even vulnerable yourself, this will likewise encourage other people to open up to you.

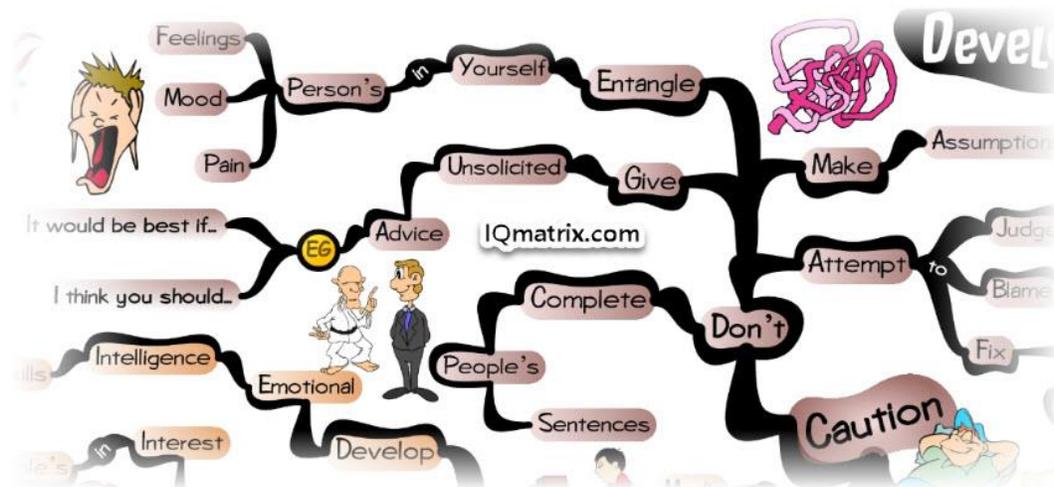
Finally, empathy requires a high degree of [emotional intelligence](#). When you're emotionally intelligent, you are better able to read people and understand their emotional needs and tendencies. You can then use this understanding to help you respond to people with a higher degree of empathy.





**themselves.** You are just there to provide them with emotional support. Guide them down the best path that will leave them feeling confident and empowered.

Finally, it's important that you **refrain from making assumptions.** People's emotions and state-of-mind will push them to say certain things that might not be entirely true or accurate. This is where you need to dig a little deeper to get to their underlying concerns and motives. It's only when all these things have surfaced will you be able to see the full picture and the story behind the veil.



## Concluding Thoughts About Empathy

Empathy, just like any other soft skill, takes time to practice and master. It requires developing your [active listening skills](#) as well as your [emotional intelligence](#). Moreover, it requires having a [genuine interest in other people](#). **If all you care about is yourself and your own well-being, then you simply don't have what it takes to develop empathy.**

However, if you're genuinely interested in the well-being of others, then working through the six-step process will help you to develop and grow your empathy skills over time. But, remember that it's a process. It takes time.

**Empathy is something you grow into over time. It's something that becomes part of your nature through mindful practice and application.**





## **Time to Assimilate these Concepts**

