

EXERCISE: *Practicing Empathy*

As you likely have noticed by now, offering empathy is a skill that takes some practice. It can be helpful to focus your practice by setting up empathy dates with your partner.

Offering empathy in your partnership is often the graduate school level of challenge when it comes to interacting in new ways. Still, you can take some baby steps with your partner and choose the level of challenge that suits your learning needs best. Follow the steps below to set yourself up for success with empathy practice in your partnership.

1. Choose a specific amount of time you would like to set aside. You may start with as little as 2 minutes each with a whole practice session lasting 5 to 10 minutes. Don't be afraid to start small. Starting small prevents unconscious avoidance of practice that comes from a sense of overwhelm.
2. Create a physical space and ritual that reminds you that you are doing empathy practice. Perhaps you move the furniture around so that there are two comfortable chairs designated for empathy practice. Perhaps you put up a small altar next to the couch and light a candle before you start. Perhaps you sit quietly before you start focusing on three slow breaths. Use ritual and physical surroundings to your advantage. It's a powerful way to signal your body that it's okay to downshift and relax into your heart.
3. Decide if you would like to start with less volatile topics. Perhaps for your first week of practice, you limit your talk to topics that don't tend to trigger reactivity. Creating this structure in the beginning allows you both to be nourished before moving to more difficult topics.
4. Keep the feelings and needs list with you and agree to follow the structure. Remember the more you say in response to your partner the more it becomes about you and your interpretations and less about your partner's feelings and needs. You may want to post the phrase, "Do you feel _____ because you need _____?" in your space so you can refer to it frequently. Whenever you get lost come back to guessing in this way.
5. Use a "talking stick" to help you remember who is receiving empathy. The person speaking holds something that designates him or her as the speaker – a stick, a pillow, a precious stone, a statue, etc. When the person is hold the talking stick the listener only guesses feelings and needs and asks questions to clarify the observations.