Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
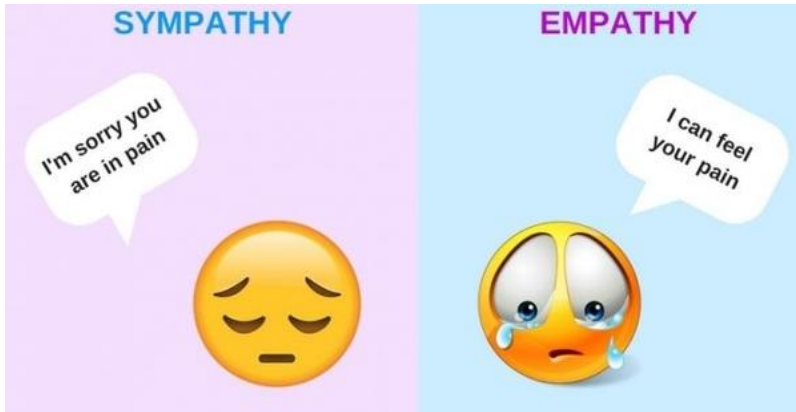
Course: Empathy vs Sympathy
Level:

Objective:
Students will be able to define empathy and sympathy, identify their respective differences and practice ways to express empathy as opposed to sympathy.

Course Intent:
Students will be introduced to the concepts of empathy and sympathy, identify the differences between sympathy and empathy, and engage in hands on practice applying empathy. One of the goals of the course is to promote the use of empathy and prevent students from applying misguided interpretations of empathy.

Applications & Benefits:
Students who practice empathy contribute to healthy school culture, foster a sense of community, reduce disruptive classroom interactions, and learn to nurture the emotions of fellow students during difficult social situations and praise fellow students during moments of achievement.

Course Snapshot
This course incorporates the following lessons.

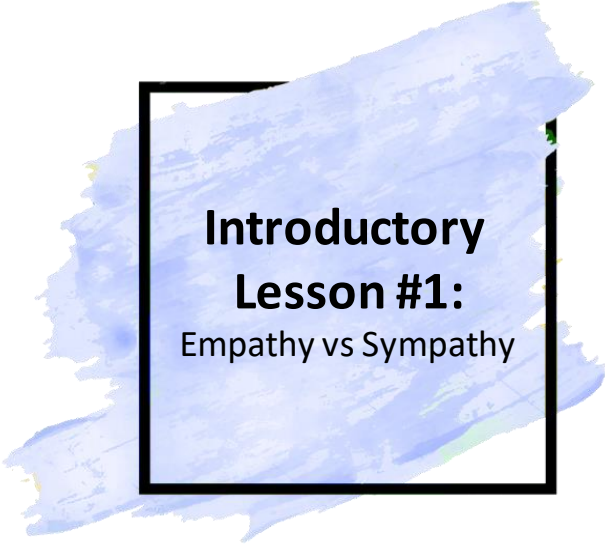|	LESSONS	ACTIVITY	TIME REQUIRED	RESOURCES & MATERIALS NEEDED
#1	Empathy vs Sympathy	Role-Play Group Discussion	15 - 20 minutes	- Lesson definitions - Chart paper - Partially deflated ball, broken toy or bag of candy (see lesson for details)
#2	Practicing Empathy in the Classroom	Group Discussion Small Group Role-Play	15 – 20 minutes	- Lesson information - Exercises - Chart paper (optional)
#3	Empathy or Sympathy?	Group Discussion Group Exercise Individual Exercise	20 – 25 minutes	- Lesson information - Index cards - Chart paper or previously made T Chart

<u>Lesson Rationale:</u>

-As teachers, we observe that modern-day students are demonstrating high levels of self-centered behavior that negatively impact classroom interactions and school culture. This trend impacts student engagement and academic performance. Teaching empathy helps students to learn how to acknowledge and accept the situations and emotions of others positively and Compassionately.

A classroom filled with empathetic students provides teachers with a more comfortable work environment. Stressful classrooms become less overwhelming when students empathize with their classmates and their teachers. Also, when empathy is understood and practiced, bullying is minimalized.

Praising Students:
Empathy is a difficult emotion to understand and to practice, for students and adults alike. Praise students for attempting to empathize, even if they are using language that can be categorized as sympathizing. Guide the difference between the two. Even providing sympathy is an act of kindness that improves school culture and helps to maintain positive classroom relationships.

Introductory Lesson #1:
Empathy vs Sympathy

Definitions

What is Empathy?
Empathy is the ability to share the feelings of another, to put yourself in another person's situation and understand their perspective and take action to express an understanding of another's feelings and situation. The word empathy comes from the German word Einfühlung, meaning "feeling into."

What is Sympathy?
Sympathy is experiencing feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune, involving merely an understanding of someone else's suffering. Sympathy can involve support in the form of shared opinions or possessing a favorable attitude (i.e. acting sad as well) towards another person's situation. Sympathy can be translated as "feeling for."

The difference between the two implies a certain distance. When you sympathize, you merely offer a response. When you empathize, you are making a connection.

"Rarely can a response make something better, what makes something better is a connection." - Brené Brown

Sympathy Language
I know how you feel.
I'm sorry to hear that.
I feel bad for you.
I'm thinking of you.

Empathy Language
You are having a tough time.
You will make it through this situation; you're strong.
You must be struggling with this. if there is anything you need, you can rely on me.
Thank you for sharing; I'm glad you told me.

How is empathy applied?
Empathy is applied through active listening, and the act of concentrating on another person's situation, not on your reaction to that person's situation. The most difficult part of applying empathy is changing the language you are used to using and "getting out of your head."

Fascinating Details

The human brain is the most complex organ in the body. Research has shown that the region responsible for feeling and expressing empathy is called the right supramarginal gyrus. When this area of the brain is injured or adversely affected, one's ability to feel and express empathy is drastically reduced. Research has also shown that the right supramarginal gyrus helps us distinguish between and connect our emotional state and the emotional states of others. Also, our empathy becomes severely limited when we must make very quick judgments.

Activity

For this activity, you will need a partially deflated ball (or broken toy). You can also use a bag of candy, such as Hershey kisses or Peanut Butter cups, depending on any allergies your students may have. Modifications for using candy are described below. Also, prepare a chart for writing down the differences you discuss between sympathy and empathy, as exemplified below.

EMPATHY	SYMPATHY
- Understanding another's perspective. - Putting yourself in someone else's shoes. - Validates feelings.	- Feeling sorry for someone. - Responding with opinions / experiences. - Tries to share feelings.

Ask three students to volunteer for this demonstration. One student will be the Toy Owner. The other two students will represent Empathy and Sympathy. You may want to provide them with a name badge that identifies them as "Empathy" or "Sympathy." For younger students, sympathy might be visualized with a sad face while empathy is visualized with a heart.

Start by giving the deflated ball/broken toy to Toy Owner and have them try to play with it. Explain that the other two students happen to walk by and see. They are named Empathy and Sympathy. If you chose to use candy instead, you can modify the activity by telling students that the three volunteers have just won a race/spelling bee/game and the prize is a piece of candy. However, one student is allergic to it and can't eat it.

Explain the definition of sympathy. Tell students that someone showing sympathy will feel sorry or feel pity for someone sad. People trying to express sympathy often mean well by saying they're sorry, offering an opinion or sharing a time when they felt the same way. Ask the student volunteering as Sympathy to try and show sympathy for Toy Owner. What could they say? What could they do? Talk through some choices as a class.

Next, explain the definition of empathy. Tell students that showing empathy is more like putting yourself in someone else's shoes, really trying to understand how they are feeling even though they might not be able to. Empathy involves trying to recognize someone's feelings as their own and validating their feelings back to them. Empathy helps us connect in a way that sympathy doesn't because when you empathize, you are sharing feelings. Ask the student volunteering as Empathy to try and show empathy for Toy Owner. What could they say? What could they do? You might have Empathy try to play with the broken toy to help "walk in their shoes," but explain that we don't always have to experience the same thing to show empathy. As a class, discuss some of the differences between sympathy and empathy. Ask students to share their experiences with sympathy and empathy and see if they can distinguish between the two. Ask the Toy Owner to tell how they felt after Sympathy tried to help and then after Empathy tried to help. Make a T-chart on chart paper or whiteboard to highlight the differences.

What to Know Before You Begin

Sympathy seems to come as second nature and most students have no problem expressing sympathy for others. The act of expressing empathy is much more difficult. While there isn't a script for showing empathy, a simple plan can be used to help students remember what they can do to show empathy towards others.

Try to understand the other person's perspective

No opinions or judgments

Recognize how they might feel

Communicate that emotion

(modified from Brené Brown's TED Talk on vulnerability)

Activity

Practice using the language of empathy through role-plays. First, start with one together as a class. Share with students the plan for showing empathy to use as a guide. Start with an example, such as a friend's dog is sick. Have students discuss what they can say and do to show empathy. Using the four steps (you could model thinking these steps aloud) 1) "How does my friend probably feel? How would I feel if my dog was sick?" 2) "Telling them about my cat dying won't make them feel better." 3) "They're probably really worried and sad." 4) "I can say, 'Thanks for sharing. It sounds like you're worried about your dog. I'm here for You."

Inform students again that people often get confused between sympathy and empathy. When someone says words like "at least" or "something like that happened to me" or "but" they might mean to show empathy, but they are showing sympathy. Remind students that it's ok to want and try to 'fix' a sad or upsetting situation for someone and that sometimes there is a way you can help. However, trying to 'fix' someone's problems to make them feel better is not always the best solution; you can ask, "How can I help?" instead. Even when there is a solution, empathy is needed to validate their feelings and make a connection with someone. For example, when someone says they forgot their lunch at home, you could offer to share your lunch, but first, validate their feelings by saying, "That stinks! You must be disappointed that you don't have your lunch. If you are hungry, I'll share my lunch."

Break students into groups of three. Explain that for each scenario one student will be the Main Character (the one with a problem), one student will be Empathy (the one to practice using empathy) and one student will be the Moderator (to provide ideas to Empathy and help the group decide if Empathy is indeed showing empathy). You may choose to provide students with lanyard badges or place name cards in front of them, so that they remember their roles. You can also choose to provide all the scenarios at once or set a timer and give students time to do one at a time.

Here are some example scenarios to choose from:
    It rained today and I couldn't ride my bike.
    I got a poor grade on my spelling test.
    I lost my new game.
    My family made me eat broccoli for dinner and I don't like broccoli.
    My grandpa is in the hospital because he fell.
    The neighbor that I always play with had to move.

Lesson #3:
Is it Sympathy or is it Empathy?

Activity

To prepare for this activity, use index cards to write the responses below, each one on a different card. You can also create a Sympathy/Empathy chart for students to tape responses to, or even use the same previously made chart from lesson one.

Tell students the following situation or write it on the whiteboard:

Quentin got home from school to find out that his Dad's car was stolen. Nobody was hurt but Quentin's toys were in the car.

Place the index cards with the pre-written responses in a basket and ask for a volunteer to choose one. A student will pull out a response from the basket and the teacher (or student, if able) will read it. The student should determine whether it is a sympathetic or empathetic response.

Examples of Sympathetic Responses
• At least your Dad can get a new car.
• I would be so angry if that happened to me.
• I'm glad I'm not in your shoes, that's awful.
• I was in the same situation recently, it's not fun.
• I bet your parents will get you some new toys.

Examples of Empathetic Responses
• You are so tough for enduring that, Quentin, good for you.
• You don't deserve that; you must be upset.
• I can't imagine what you're going through. You must be disappointed.
• You must be frustrated, that is a tough situation.
• That's tough; I don't know what to say. If you need anything, you can turn to me.

Helpful Tips

• If time allows, write more than ten responses and allow every student to differentiate the difference between language that expresses sympathy, or language that expresses empathy.

• Divide the class in half or in small groups to make this a game. Once a card is drawn, students can consult their groups for deciding.

Quick Quiz

1. What is an example of empathy?
    A.) Feeling sorry for someone
    B.) Telling someone you don't understand what they're going through
    C.) Understanding someone's pain
    D.) Trying to experience someone else's pain

2. How is empathy different than sympathy?
    A.) Empathy connects deeper
    B.) Empathy builds a better relationship
    C.) Empathy seeks to understand
    D.) All of the above

3. A friend of yours is having a hard time in school because of their parents fighting at home, you should:
    A.) Tell them you're sorry, but they should try to focus more on school
    B.) Ignore the problem and let them deal with it alone
    C.) Understand where they are coming from and tell them that they can talk to you anytime
    D.) Tell them about when your aunt and uncle got divorced.

Teacher Feedback

Please provide insights on any adjustments made regarding the actual use of the content above.
Feel free to share your thoughts, suggestions, constructive criticsim.
Email your feedback to: info@mylearningtools.org