



Module Title
Practicing Empathy and Sympathy

Social Emotional Learning Curriculum
SEL Topic: Self-Management
Level: High School

At A Glance

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Lesson Overview	About Empathy and Sympathy	Teacher Activity Guides	Teacher Tools	Quiz

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to describe the concepts of empathy and sympathy and be able to distinguish between the two. Students will practice exercises for utilizing both empathy and sympathy.

Activity Snapshots

This lesson incorporates the following activities, information and Teacher Tools.

Title	Activity Type	Approx. Time	Resources and Materials
Activity 1: What is Empathy and Sympathy?	Discussion Brainstorming Session	5 – 10 minutes	About Empathy and Sympathy Student Instructions Activity Definitions White board and expo markers
Activity 2: Is it empathy or sympathy?	Discussion	10 minutes	About Empathy and Sympathy Student Instructions Activity Definitions Teacher Tool: Is it empathy or sympathy?
Activity 3: Role Playing Empathy	Role Play Activity	10 minutes	About Empathy and Sympathy Student Instructions Activity Definitions Teacher Tool: Role-Playing Empathy
Activity 4: Making Connections	Journaling Discussion	5 – 10 minutes	About Empathy and Sympathy Student Instructions Activity Definitions Student Journals, notebook paper, or Teacher Tool: Journaling for Empathy

Description/Intent:



In this module, students will gain an understanding of and define empathy and sympathy, work together to practice using empathetic techniques, learn exercises through which they can practice using empathy, and implement those exercises in their daily routines.

Applications & Benefits:

There are several uses for exercising empathetic behavior that would benefit students in a classroom setting as well as in their everyday lives. Practicing empathy allows people to gain respect for others, improve social connections and communication skills, and improves listening skills. The ability to empathize, rather than only sympathize, helps create deeper connections with those around us.

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About Empathy and Sympathy

Defining Empathy and Sympathy

What is empathy and sympathy?

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."

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 main difference between the two is sympathy is a personal, more individualized feeling whereas empathy is a more complex expression that takes into account someone else's feelings and allows you to develop a deeper connection with others.

Language is very important when distinguishing the difference between empathy and sympathy. Statements that utilize empathy always relate back to the person you are trying to connect with; empathetic language is void of personal "I.." statements.

Examples of Sympathetic Language:

I know how you feel.

I'm sorry to hear that.

I feel bad for you.

I'm thinking of you.

- **These statements offer a simple response and they offer minimal comfort and validation. It is good to be sympathetic, however expression of empathy is what builds connections and offers up deeper understanding to someone's circumstances.**

Examples of Empathetic 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.

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Thank you for sharing; I'm glad you told me.

- **The key to empathetic language and behaviors is the ability to validate someone's feelings and actions rather than agreeing with them or offering an easy response.**

Module Rationale:

Empathy allows you to make a connection with people instead of simply emoting a response. Practicing empathy is a valuable tool to become a better learner. Scholars have identified the ability to communicate, understand and appreciate the behaviors and feelings of others as important skills of successful learners. Empathy is a quality that allows someone to become a well-rounded learner because it allows you to demonstrate appreciation and deep understanding of someone else's feelings and situation. Empathy in its own right is a beneficial skill to possess for everyday life, however it is also a very important quality to have for fostering a healthier learning environment. Learning empathetic behavior is important in order to understand someone else's perspective, being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes, in order to make that connection. Practicing empathy allows people to feel more compassion for their peers and in turn makes it easier to navigate difficult social situations.

Feedback to Students

Remind students that empathy and sympathy can be taught. It is common for students to believe that some are born with more sympathy than others. Acknowledge that while this may be true about our natural dispositions, empathy is also an acquired skill. Tell students to be patient with themselves.

Helpful Tips

- Have students "imagine themselves in the other person's shoes" so they can have a more empathetic approach to social situations
- If students are having a difficult time connecting with the material, model some simple everyday examples of empathy and sympathy.

Additional Information

Brené Brown talks about empathy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

Teacher Feedback

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



Activity #1: What is Empathy and Sympathy?

Teacher Instructions

Carefully read pages 2 and 3 that describe the basics of empathy and sympathy. Make the Student Instructions for Activity #1 accessible for students (via projector, hand copies, online host, etc.).

Definitions

What is empathy?

Empathy is the ability to understand another's feelings and what they are experiencing.

What is sympathy?

Sympathy is the emotion of pity or sorrow, expressed when something sad or tragic occurs.

Activity

Assess students' previous knowledge of empathy and sympathy. Create a "T chart" by writing the word "Empathy" on one side of the chart and the word "Sympathy" on the other side of the chart on the classroom white board. Ask students to volunteer any words or activities that they associate with the word "Empathy", and then repeat the same for "Sympathy." Try to get participation from all areas of the room and avoid calling on the same students.

After five minutes, or until the students run out of ideas, discuss with students the definitions of empathy and sympathy as presented in this lesson plan. Explain to them the difference between the two and some examples of the difference in language. Return to the T chart and clarify any misconceptions that students might have had about sympathy and empathy. For example, reread the ideas and examples that were provided and decide if everyone still agrees that they are in fact, example of sympathy or empathy. If time allows, ask students to share their opinions on empathy and sympathy and why it is important to understand the difference between the two. Ask students to share examples of how they implement empathy in their lives. Allow students to ask questions at any point.



Activity 2: Is it empathy or sympathy?

Teacher Instructions

Carefully read pages 2 and 3 that describe the basics of empathy and sympathy. Make the Student Instructions for Activity #2 and Teacher Tool: Empathy or Sympathy? accessible for students (via projector, hand copies, online host, etc.). The answer key for Teacher Tool: Empathy or Sympathy? is located within the directions for of this teacher Activity Guide.

If a projector or hard copies are unavailable, you can simply write the statements from Teacher Tool: Empathy or Sympathy? on a white board or chart paper.

Definitions

What is empathy?

Empathy is the ability to understand another’s feelings and what they are experiencing.

What is sympathy?

Sympathy is the emotion of pity or sorrow, expressed when something sad or tragic occurs.

Activity

Remind students that empathy can be practiced and learned. Inform students that there are important distinctions between how someone displays empathy and how someone displays sympathy. Generally, sympathy redirects attention back to oneself, whereas empathy focuses on the other person, while listening and acknowledging their feelings. Empathy is usually, but not always, devoid of, “I...” statements.

Display Teacher Tool: Empathy or Sympathy? for students. Ask students to share whether the statements given are examples of empathy or sympathy. Spend time discussing why each is either an empathetic response or a sympathetic one. Discuss how the examples of sympathy might be altered to express empathy instead. Below are the statements and answers from the Teacher Tool: Empathy or Sympathy? along with some possible responses.

<p>Saying, “I’m sorry to hear that.” (Sympathy; this response in itself is not focused on the other person. It is important to acknowledge the other person’s</p>	<p>Saying, “You are having a tough time.” (Empathy; this helps acknowledge the person’s pain.)</p>	<p>Saying, “Thank you for sharing.” (Empathy; this response helps connect with the person, by showing gratitude that they opened up to you.)</p>
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feelings by adding, “I wish you didn’t have to go through this. It must be difficult.”		
Be present in the moment with someone, without judging their feelings or reactions. (empathy)	Telling a story about when you lost your cat too and how sad you were when it happened. (Sympathy; it is natural for us to think that sharing the pain means sharing a similar struggle. However, this is focused on you, not the other person.)	Saying, “I am here for you.” (Empathy; it is okay to show support to someone. This might even be followed up with, “How can I help you?”)
Saying, “I know how you feel.” (Sympathy; similar to saying, “I am sorry to hear that,” this statement is focused on you, not the other person.)	Offering advice. (Sympathy; everyone	Saying, “At least you can still bring your grade up,” if your friend failed a test. (Sympathy; the ‘at least’ responses diminish how the person is feeling.)
Validating someone’s feelings by saying, “That sounds really challenging.” (empathy)	Show interest by asking, “What has this been like for you?” (Empathy; it can help the other person to not feel so isolated or lonely when someone shows interest in understanding their feelings.)	Just listening. (Empathy; active listening is key.)



Activity #3: Role-Playing Empathy

Teacher Instructions

Carefully read pages 2 and 3 that describe the basics of empathy and sympathy. Make the Student Instructions for Activity #3 accessible for students (via projector, hand copies, online host, etc.).

Decide if you would like to pair students for the activity or ask for student volunteers to role-play the scenarios.

Definitions

What is Compassion?

Compassion is the ability to sympathize with others and their situation coupled with the desire to do something to alleviate their struggle or distress. While empathy involves our ability to feel or take on the perspective of another, compassion occurs when those feelings include motivation to help. Practicing compassion in multiple aspects of your life will allow you to make a much more significant impact with the connections you make through empathy.

Activity

Begin the activity by reviewing empathy and then introduce the concept of compassion. While empathy and compassion are often used interchangeably, they are two separate concepts. In simple terms, compassion is the next step from empathy. Empathy is sharing with the feelings of another, and compassion is having those feelings along with feelings of a desire to help.

Have the students pair up for a discussion-based role play. The goal of this exercise is to have students actively practice utilizing empathy and compassion in a real-world context. One of the students in the pair will be say one of the role-play statements and create a simulated situation that allows the other student to practice empathy or compassion. Example role-play scenarios are described below and listed in the Teacher Tool: Role-Playing Empathy. You can choose to have student pairs pick a scenario, assign a different scenario to each pair, or discuss each as a class and ask for student volunteers to demonstrate.

Once the statement has been made, the second student will practice empathy by replying to the situation using empathetic language. If compassion, or acting to help, is appropriate for the



situation, have the student role-play what they would do. For example, when someone has lost a significant other and is grieving, sometimes simply showing empathy may be the best way to help.

Set a timer for five minutes to allow for meaningful conversations. If students are struggling with the concept, please assist with some examples of empathetic language. Allow students time to practice more than one scenario. You can also allow students to come up with their own situations.

Role-Play Scenarios

- “My dog is really sick right now. He’s been at throwing up his food all day.”
- “I have been having a really tough time with my mom. We argue everyday about something different.”
- “I just found out I didn’t get into my first-choice college.”
- “My sister borrowed my cell phone and dropped it. Now the screen is cracked but I can’t afford a new one.”
- “My grandpa passed away today. I haven’t seen him in a while, but my dad is taking it pretty hard.”
- “My little brother was diagnosed with Ewing’s Sarcoma. It’s a type of cancer.”

Before ending the activity, spend time with students discussing how they felt during the role-play. Ask students how this translates to making and improving our connections with others. Remind students to continue practicing empathy and compassion daily.



Activity #4: Making Connections

Teacher Instructions

Carefully read pages 2 and 3 that describe the basics of empathy and sympathy. Make the Student Instructions for Activity #4 accessible for students (via projector, hand copies, online host, etc).

Prior to the day when you plan to carry out this lesson plan, tell students to bring a notebook or journal if they have one. If a student is unable to afford this, reassure them that that is not a problem. You can provide them with a small composition notebook, they can also use notebook paper for journaling, or you can make copies of the provided Teacher Tool: Journaling for Empathy.

Definitions

Why is it important to make empathetic connections?

Making connections with people is all about having the optimal experience of being a human in this life. Humans are social beings and practicing empathy can create more meaningful social connections. Practicing empathy will allow you to gain appreciation, understanding, respect, and encourage compassion for all the people you come across. Having an empathetic approach to situations will overall be a much more positive experience for everyone involved.

Activity

Tell students to get out their journals or notebooks. Likewise, you can make copies of the Teacher Tool: Journaling for Empathy and provide to students that do not have a journal. On the first page of the journal, tell them to write the word "Empathy." Review with students the definition and importance of practicing empathy. Tell them to write the definition, created individually or as a class, next to the word. Remind students to ask questions if they do not understand the concept or if they need clarification.

After every student has written and understood the definition of empathy, tell them that they will use the journal as an exercise to be more empathetic.



The activity will involve a mixture of normal journaling and empathetic journaling. Explain to them that they will have 8 minutes of total journaling time. Tell students to draw a line down the middle of the page. On the left side, tell them to write the word “journaling.”

Set a timer for four minutes. Tell students to write down a stream of consciousness of their thoughts about using empathy and its importance on the side they labeled “Journaling.” Remind them that what they write will not be shared with the class or with the teacher. This will encourage them to be open in their writing. When the timer goes off, tell students to stop writing.

Set another timer for four minutes and tell the students to write the word “Empathetic” on the right-hand side of the page. Have them write about some examples where they can practice empathy and where empathy will help them make a better connection with someone. This can include things that happened during their day or anything that crosses their mind. When the timer goes off, tell students to stop writing.

Transition into discussion time. Ask students how they felt during the activity. What were some of the challenges that you encountered? How do you feel after completing the activity? Feel free to ask students to share what they wrote down, but do not force them to do so. Students might have written personal events that they are not comfortable with sharing.

Remind students of the importance of this activity. Tell them that the goal is to practice taking the perspective of others. There are many ways to practice doing this, such as journaling, reading literary fiction, trying new experiences, and meeting people outside your normal circles. If you ask students to journal at home, remember not to ask them to turn the journal in for an assignment grade. What the students wrote is personal and it should not be a requirement to share it. However, assure them that they are welcome to share it with you after class if they want to.



Student Instructions Activity #1: What is Empathy and Sympathy?

Brainstorm

What comes to mind when you think of the word empathy?

What come to mind when you think of the word sympathy?

Define

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."

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."

Take a Look

Research shows that, "successful learners also have (4) insight into the motives, feelings, and behavior of others and the ability to communicate this understanding--in a word, empathy" (Cotton 1992). Having the ability to connect with others is an important part of one's overall well-being and success in all endeavors of life.

Discuss

How do you show empathy in your life?

Fascinating Detail

Scientists have discovered that empathetic individuals may unconsciously mirror the mannerisms or facial expressions of others. Empathetic individuals tend to activate the same motor and sensory areas in their brains as those being activated in the individual they are observing. For example, in witnessing someone bumping their head, more empathetic individuals activate a similar sensory area of the brain for the pain associated with bumping their head. Thus, there is some science to back the saying, "I feel your pain."



Student Instructions Activity #2: Is it empathy or sympathy?

Review

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."

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."

Think

Take a look at the statements and decide whether each is an example of an empathetic response or a sympathetic one.

Why do you think it is an example of empathy or sympathy? What can be changed to make the sympathetic responses more empathetic?

Discuss

How are the speech and actions of empathy different from those of sympathy?

Quote of the Day

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



Sympathy or Empathy?

Decide whether the following statements or actions are examples of sympathy or of empathy.

Saying, "I'm sorry to hear that."	Saying, "You are having a tough time."	Saying, "Thank you for sharing."
Be present in the moment with someone, without judging their feelings or reactions.	Telling a story about when you lost your cat too and how sad you were when it happened.	Saying, "I am here for you."
Validating someone's feelings by saying, "That sounds really challenging."	Offering advice.	Saying, "At least you can still bring your grade up," if your friend failed a test.
Saying, "I know how you feel."	Show interest by asking, "What has this been like for you?"	Just listening.



Student Instructions Activity #3: Role-Playing Empathy

Review

What is empathy?

Define

What is Compassion?

Compassion is the ability to sympathize with others and their situation and the desire to connect with that person or situation. Compassion is a necessary trait in order to exercise empathy. Including compassion in multiple aspects of your life will allow you to make a much more significant impact with the connections you make through empathy.

- How are empathy and compassion related?
- Why is it important to practice compassion?

Role Play

Get together with a partner. Take turns practicing empathetic and compassionate responses to the situations provided or create your own situations. Use empathetic language to respond to the person about their situation. The goal of empathy and compassion is to make a meaningful connection.

Discuss

How does being empathetic towards each other improve your connection and understanding of one another?

Apply

It is a good idea to focus on compassion and empathy when having conversations with others. In fact, neuroscientists discovered that feeling compassionate is linked to parts of the brain responsible for learning and reward in decision-making. Practice this daily!

Quote of the Day

“Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another and feeling with the heart of another.” – Alfred Adler.



Role-Playing Empathy

Take turns practicing empathetic and compassionate responses to the situations provided or create your own situations

Role-Play Scenarios

- “My dog is really sick right now. He’s been at throwing up his food all day.”
- “I have been having a really tough time with my mom. We argue everyday about something different.”
- “I just found out I didn’t get into my first-choice college.”
- “My sister borrowed my cell phone and dropped it. Now the screen is cracked but I can’t afford a new one.”
- “My grandpa passed away today. I haven’t seen him in a while, but my dad is taking it pretty hard.”
- “My little brother was diagnosed with Ewing’s Sarcoma. It’s a type of cancer.”



Student Instructions Activity #4: Making Connections

Engage

Why is it important to make empathetic connections?

Making connections with people is all about having the optimal experience of being a human in this life. Practicing empathy will allow you to gain appreciation, understanding, compassion, and respect for all the people you come across. Having an empathetic approach to situations will overall be a much more positive experience for everyone involved.

Recall

On the “Journal” side of your page, write down why you think empathy is important, how it can help you understand someone better.

Next on the “Empathy” side of your page, write down some examples of a situation where empathy helped you to better understand someone, or how you could utilize empathy and compassion more in your everyday life. Write two or three in your journal or on your paper.

Reflect

What did you learn from your role play exercise? Write down your learned lessons. What are some positive changes you want to make in order to have better connections?

Apply

Remember, using empathy is about hearing and understanding someone deeper than surface level. Empathy can be practiced in many ways, such as:

- Reading literacy fiction: think about how the characters feel.
- Journaling: write about your day and how you did or can respond to others with empathy.
- Trying something new: visit a new church or join a new study group.
- Be curious about others: make new friends outside of your normal circle.



Journaling for Empathy

What is empathy? How can you utilize empathy to make a positive impact in other's lives?

Journaling

Empathy





Quiz

1. What is an example of an empathetic statement?
 - a. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'll be thinking of you."
 - b. "What happened is really sad, that stinks."
 - c. "You must be struggling with this."
 - d. "I know how you feel; that happened to me once."

2. Which of the following is a difference between empathy and sympathy?
 - a. Empathy fosters a deeper connection than sympathy.
 - b. Sympathy involves more complex skills than empathy.
 - c. There is no difference between sympathy and empathy.
 - d. None of the above.

3. Why should we try to be more empathetic?
 - a. It will improve our capabilities to understand others.
 - b. Empathy will positively impact relationships with others.
 - c. Empathy allows us to be more respectful of another's feelings.
 - d. All of the above.