

Advanced Empathy Techniques*

By David D. Burns, MD

Changing the Focus

You focus on the process rather than the content of the argument. In other words, you might gently point out that the two of you are arguing and not working together as a team. You bring the conflict to conscious awareness in a kindly way, so you can both talk about your feelings, rather than trying to figure out who's right and who's wrong.

In a sense, there's an elephant in the room, but everyone's ignoring the tension pretending it isn't there. When you change the focus, you point to the elephant and say, "Do you see what I see?"

Multiple-Choice Empathy

When you have no idea where someone is coming from, and they're reluctant to tell you, you can suggest several possibilities and ask if any of them ring a bell. It's like priming the pump. You might say, "I can imagine you might be feeling X, Y, or Z. Do any of those words ring a bell?" X, Y and Z could be words from the Feeling Words chart.

Multiple-Choice Empathy can be especially helpful when the other person refuses to open up and tell you how they're feeling. You'll have to be disarming rather than blaming when you list the possible reasons why the other person doesn't want to talk to you. You'll also have to do this in a way that sounds caring, respectful, and concerned, and not demanding or condescending.

Positive Reframing

You put a positive spin on the situation. For example, you can reframe an angry conflict as a golden opportunity to develop a better relationship with the person you're at odds with, rather than viewing the problem as a prelude to Armageddon.

You can also reframe the other person's motives or behavior in a positive way. For example, if someone seems stubborn, dogmatic, and argumentative, you could think of them as having intense conviction and desperately wanting you to understand them. You can also consider the almost possibility that you haven't been disarming them in a genuine way, and that's the precise reason they keep arguing. Or, if a loved one is acting nasty, you could reframe their behavior as an expression of the hurt, loneliness, or frustration she or he is feeling.