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**empathy
blocks**

empathy blocks

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What is it about:

- Behaviours preventing being present and empathetic
- Exploration what is empathy and what is not
- Practice to receive empathetically

SOURCE: “Nonviolent Communication: a language of life” by Marshall Rosenberg

domains: nonviolent communication, empathy

approach description:

This canva is based on a nonviolent communication method described in canva “NVC circle” (we encourage you to check it for getting familiar with the basics of Nonviolent Communication). “Empathy blocks” is a canva about common behaviours which prevent us from being present to connect empathetically with others. As Rosenberg mentions in his book, his friend Holley Humphrey identified some of those “Empathy blocks” and they can be described as:

Advising: “I think you should...”, “How come you didn’t...?”

One-upping: “That is nothing, what happened to me ...”

Educating: “This could turn into a positive experience for you if you just...”

Consoling: “It wasn’t your fault; you did the best you could.”

Story-telling: “That reminds me of the time...”

Shutting down: “Cheer up. Don’t feel so bad.”

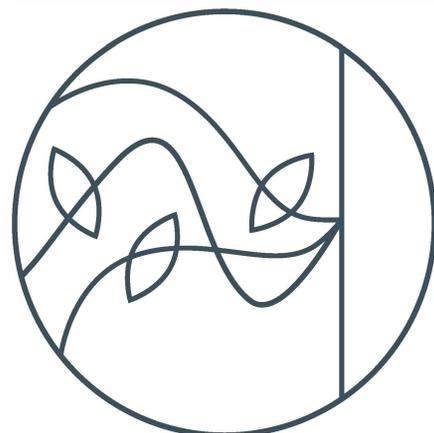
Sympathising: “Oh, you poor thing...”

Interrogating: “When did this begin?”

Explaining: “I would have called but...”

Correcting: “That is not what has happened.”

communication canvas



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Hearing what other people are observing, feeling, needing and requesting is part of the communication process in NVC referred to as receiving empathetically. To be able to receive empathetically we need to understand what empathy is. Rosenberg quotes a few definitions of empathy. One of them is: respectful understanding of what others are experiencing. He also mentions empathy is about being present, thus he recalls Buddhist saying: “don’t just do something, stand there”. Yet, the presence that empathy requires is not easy to maintain. Instead of giving empathy, we tend to give advice or reassurance and to explain our own position or feelings. But empathy requires to focus all attention on the other person’s message. The belief we may have to “fix” situations, to make others feel better or to intellectually understand the problem - prevents us from being present.

aim of use:

The activity can serve as a space to reflect what is empathy, what blocks empathy, and how communication can shift in the direction of defensiveness and resistance when we are not present with the others, but we try to “fix” them. It can be used as a method to explore and practice empathy.

educational method:

- **Step 1: Introduction**

Introduce the activity and its aim. Recall the basics about NVC, especially about two elements of NVC: 1. expressing honestly (self-expression by using 4 steps) and 2. receiving empathetically (hearing what others observe, feel, need, request). Emphasize this activity will focus on receiving empathetically.

- **Step 2: Empathy trial**

Ask the participants to write down on the piece of paper the first reaction/sentence in the mentioned below situation. Encourage learners to write down the first thing which comes to their mind, even if it is not what they are proud of. Ensure this writing is anonymous and it will not be revealed who wrote what. The situation to react to is: Imagine I would say to you “I am stupid as a donkey!”.

Give participants a few moments to note down their first answers and ask them to keep the papers in the pocket. Leave the papers for now and let participants know there will be a moment to come back to them to make sense of this practice.



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- **Step 3: Empathy blocks**

Present to participants the empathy blocks and their background. The presentation can have a format of short scenes in which one facilitator tells about their relatively small problem and the other one responds to the story by acting out their reaction using one of the empathy blocks. Participants need to recognize and name the empathy block after each short scene.

- **Step 4: Back to empathy trial**

After the presentation of all the empathy blocks: ask the learners to recall what they wrote on the paper in Step 2. Ask if any of the participants wrote something which is similar to any of the empathy blocks? (Do not force sharing, it is more as a rhetorical questions giving space to realize how often we do not use empathy, but other strategies as a reaction to problems shared by others).

Sum this part by recalling “Empathy blocks” are common behaviours that prevent us from being sufficiently present to connect empathetically with others. We may usually have a tendency to fix situations (give advice) or go to intellectual understanding. Such behaviours block empathy as we focus on thinking how people refer to our theories instead of being present for them.

- **Step 5: Reassurance**

Note that empathy can be mixed with reassurance. In the situation in Step 2 reassurance could sound like: “*You are not stupid! You are an intelligent creature!*”. Offering reassurance can cause frustration if all a person is looking for is empathy.

- **Step 6: Empathy**

Ask participants what they think the empathetic reaction to the situation in Step 2 could look like. After collecting a few ideas, you can also share your proposal (it could for example sound like: “Are you feeling disappointed with your brain capacity today?”

Open a discussion on what is empathy? Brainstorm and put ideas on a flipchart. Gather 3-4 voices in the plenary. Reassure participants that empathy is a competence that can be learned. Note that Rosenberg quotes a few definitions of empathy in his book. One of them in his book is: “Respectful understanding of what others are experiencing”.



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- **Step 7: Empathy tips**

Propose to participants two tips on how to listen with empathy (how to receive empathetically):

- by asking questions with guesses, instead of open ended ones
- by using the following questions to guess feelings and needs:

*Are you feeling ... (here guess a feeling)
because you need...? (here guess a need)*

- **Step 8: Empathy practice**

Invite participants to pair up and explain they will have a chance to practice receiving empathetically. Person A from the pair tells about a difficult situation which happened in the last 2-3 days (from level 1 to 10 of difficulty, invite to choose a story on level 1 for the sake of learning). And person B in the pair guesses the feelings and needs of Person A by asking “were you feeling ... because you were needing...?”

Person A hears the guess and confirms them, or changes the named feelings and needs, or connects them to a deeper need. Then the participants switch roles.

- **Step 9: Debriefing**

Ask learners to reflect in the plenary over the following questions:

- How are you feeling?
- How was the process of naming feelings and needs?
- Were you tempted to use one of the empathy blocks? Which one?
- What empathetic receiving can bring?
- Were you able to sense relief through empathy?
- What is your learning from this process?

read more:

- **Book:** Marshall B. Rosenberg, Nonviolent communication. A Language of life (2015)
- **Canva:** communication canva “12 Roadblocks”



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