Be Known, the Podcast

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Episode 85: The Basics of Practicing Empathy

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This is Be Known, and I’m Kerrah Fabacher. Welcome Back and Happy New Year! You’re listening to episode \_\_\_85\_\_\_. We were made for relationship, but so often our relationships are broken. And when our relationships are broken, we are broken. One of our deepest human desires is to be known, but we often have lost ourselves along the way. This is a podcast to help you get your relationships back to a place of wholeness. A place of authentic connection, where you feel truly known.

So come on in and sit a while. Let’s exchange fear for love and finally see what good relationships are made of.

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It’s weird how episodes sometimes are built over long periods of time, after lots of conversations and experiences, after lots of reading and learning. And how some just seem to pop up and demand to be heard right here, right now. This episode was the latter. Mainly because just in the last two weeks or so, I’ve had multiple people ask me the same questions, and I’ve asked them the same kind of things in response. Because I’m a counselor and we have to be annoying and answer questions with questions. \*Insert big weird awkward smiling emoji\*

But for real, y’all, today we’re talking about empathy.

This word is a word many people use but they don’t know how to actually practice it. They try, sure, but they don’t always hit the mark.

This isn’t about shaming when you (or someone around you) has gotten this wrong. Nope. We’re all in process. We’re all learning. And we’re all trying to figure out the best ways to show empathy to others. So we can give ourselves and others grace in this, but we also can be responsible for learning and growing and expect others to grow, too. If we are struggling with the concept and tangible practice of empathy, then we need to commit to working on it. And if our people are struggling with it, we’ve got to be able to tell them what we need from them.

But this is easier said than done.

And really, many of us didn’t grow up learning this skill. Like at all.

So let’s simplify it a bit.

You know I love a good definition, so let’s define it first.

Empathy is the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of another person, animal, or fictional character. Developing empathy is crucial for establishing relationships and behaving compassionately. It involves experiencing another person’s point of view, rather than just one’s own, and enables prosocial or helping behaviors that come from within, rather than being forced.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Empathy is understanding. And it’s not just understanding; it’s communicating that you understand (or would like to understand) in a caring way. It’s showing someone they matter.

Empathy is not agreeing. There are many times I hear someone say something or do something, and I do not agree. Or think it’s wise or whatever. But I can still demonstrate empathy and understanding. Because every human matters just as much as the next one. And there is space for them all.

When do we need to practice empathy? Um, is all the time an answer? Because if we’re with another human, especially if that human is struggling emotionally, then empathy needs to be present. SOOOO pretty much all the time. Ha.

Why is empathy so important? Goodness. I don’t have enough time to tell you, but the main things? It connects people, helps them feel safe, validates, and supports. It heals and helps a person process without shame. It breaks down walls and builds intimacy and trust. So many things here.

Okay, how does this play out practically? You’re going to seriously hate this, but it probably it going to depend on the relationship and the person. There are some universal statements, questions, and behaviors that can communicate empathy, though. So we’ll start there. This doesn’t have to be super complicated, just an FYI.

Here are some statements and questions that communicate empathy:

I hear you.

That sounds really hard.

I’m sorry you’re walking through that.

It makes sense that you’d feel that way.

Your feelings are valid.

I can see that.

I can’t imagine what that must be like.

Thank you for sharing that with me.

I’m noticing you seem to be feeling \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Are you doing okay right now?

Help me understand what you mean.

Is there anything I can do for you in this moment?

Is there anything you need from me right now?

That must have been hard to share.

How can I best support you in this?

Here are some behaviors that communicate empathy:

eye contact. Recently I was telling a couple of my dear friends here about some stuff, and just their undivided attention was enough to make me feel so seen. So look at someone, even if they aren’t looking at you because they’re processing.

undivided attention. Put your phone down. Pay attention to what they’re saying.

Mirror their emotional reactions and body language when appropriate. So like, if you notice they’ve gotten still and more quiet in their tone, mirror that. If they’re laughing, laugh with them.

Touch if appropriate. When my safe people reach out and grab my hand or rub my back when I’m sharing something hard… gosh, I feel so safe. So loved. So seen. This won’t always be appropriate, but when it is, lean into it.

Don’t interrupt and be an active listener.

Don’t pass judgment or try to fix their problem.

Follow-up with things talked about and help in whatever way the person needs if that’s within your capacity.

Okay, so these work most of the time, but it’s important to lean into each person individually. I’ve had several people tell me recently they need emotional support and understanding from their partners, and my first question is, “okay, what specific things demonstrate love and support and empathy to you from other safe people in your life?” There’s always some overlap, but there’s also things that are unique to the individual. Some people need non-sexual, gentle touch in those moments. Some need for a person to not try to step in and fix. Some would like to be left alone for a while. Some would like for more conversation and not just a “that sounds hard” comment. Some need to be served. Try to lean into what they need, not what you think they need.

Now, people can’t read your mind. Even your closest people. So if you need those things in order to feel supported and seen and understood, my friend, you’ve got to use your words and clarify that to your friend, loved one, partner, or whoever. If you don’t know what you need to feel emotionally supported, then sit down and think about it for a while. What person in your life makes you feel most safe, most seen, most understood? How do they act and what do they say when you’re in need, when you’re telling them about something hard going on, when you’re feeling stressed or angry or sad? Be as specific as you can. Because maybe those are the things you need. And consider how you feel loved best because that may help, too.

Regardless, you’ll need to clarify, especially if a person isn’t being helpful or they’re responding in a way that’s not helpful, and maybe even hurtful. And if they’re still not responding in helpful ways, more boundaries may need to come into play.

All of this can stretch us. It will stretch us. We’re naturally bent toward selfishness and our perspectives and our opinions and our feelings instead of trying to understand or validate another’s. But this is necessary if we want good relationships, y’all. It’s a non-negotiable.

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Thanks for sitting a while with me. I trust that learning how to practice empathy will help you take a step toward wholeness so you can finally see what good relationships are made of.

Along with counseling for those in Louisiana, I also do one-on-one online coaching for those (anywhere!) needing to work on their relationships. We talk boundaries, communication, self-worth, healthy and unhealthy dynamics, and more! If this sounds like the exact thing you need, I have a couple of spots open right now, so you can visit [www.kerrahfabacher.com/book-online](http://www.kerrahfabacher.com/book-online) for more information. I also briefly explain the difference between counseling and coaching, but if you have any questions, email me at [info@kerrahfabacher.com](mailto:info@kerrahfabacher.com).

To finish up, the transcript for this episode is on the podcast page on my website, kerrahfabacher.com.

A big thanks to my friend Robert Hargrove for creating the music for the show, and fellow hope\*writer, Alana Dawson, for being a great editor.

Until next time friend, I’ll see you soon.

1. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy [↑](#footnote-ref-1)