



To create safe and brave spaces of belonging, we need to commit to doing *our work* before we do *the work* and to working within our scope and skill.

Integration Idea

Empathy

Key concepts:

- Developing an understanding of the meaning of empathy.
 - Empathy is connecting with people so we know we're not alone when we're in struggle.
 - Empathy is a way to connect to the *emotion* another person is experiencing; it doesn't require that we have experienced the same *situation* they are going through.
- Helping students understand what empathy is, why it takes practice, and how we have to be willing to make mistakes as we practice. We're practicing empathy so that we can be kind with ourselves and each other—creating a braver, more connected classroom.
- The attributes of empathy in *Dare to Lead* are complex skill sets. If you think your students are prepared to talk about those constructs, in-depth explanations are available in *Daring Greatly* and *Dare to Lead*. We recommend these steps with students who need less complex constructs.
 - Be kind.
 - Be curious.
 - You don't need to fix it or make people feel better. Connecting and listening is powerful.
 - Try to understand how the person is feeling (not how you might feel in the same situation).
 - Help people know that they are not alone in their feelings. Even if you've never had that experience, you might know the feeling.
 - Let people know that you are grateful they shared with you.
- Allowing opportunities for second chances. When we miss the opportunity to show empathy or when we would like the opportunity to do it better, we can say, "I'd like to circle back." In this context, circling back means practicing empathy by trying again.

Be mindful:

- People often confuse sympathy with empathy. Sympathy is I feel bad FOR you. Empathy is I feel WITH you. Sympathy can make us feel more alone. Empathy helps us feel connected.
- Empathy is a practice that grows over time—we often use the example of shooting free throws in basketball. You have to miss a lot of shots before you start consistently making them. Empathy is not something that should be measured or evaluated, only taught, encouraged, and modeled.

Examples: A friend doesn't understand what we are doing in math class right now. I am really good at math, so I haven't experienced feeling upset about math, BUT I know what it's like to not understand an assignment because I often feel that way about science. We are connecting to the emotion of feeling lost and frustrated in class, not connecting with the specific experience of not understanding the current topic in math class.

Classroom Discussion Ideas:

- Brené's RSA short on empathy can be a great starting place for discussion. The video can be found at [brenebrown.com/devideos](https://www.brenebrown.com/devideos).
- When it comes to empathy, we all have different needs and even our own needs may differ depending on the situation. There is no right or wrong way to demonstrate or receive empathy. One way to illustrate this is to read the following statements and responses aloud, and have students raise their hands when they hear responses that they can relate to. Be sure to explain that there are no right or wrong answers.
 - **When I'm having a hard time or my feelings are hurt and I share what I'm feeling with someone, I like that person to:**
 - look right at me
 - look away a little so it doesn't feel so hard
 - give me a hug
 - give me some space
 - say something so I'm not just standing there
 - just listen and stay quiet

- **When someone is having a hard time or their feelings are hurt, and they share what they're feeling with me:**
 - I worry that I might not say the right thing
 - I want to say something that will make them feel better
 - I get nervous
 - I want to fix it
- A community empathy commitment can serve as a great reminder to practice empathy in the classroom (and in general).
 - On a chart paper or bulletin board write, *"I agree to practice empathy, mess up, circle back, clean it up, and try again."*
 - Have every student in the class sign the commitment.
- Empathy Misses: Empathy is a complex skill, and there are some common ways that we all sometimes get it wrong. We call these "empathy misses." Developing an understanding of the common empathy misses can help us learn how to show accurate empathy. This concept might be most appropriate for secondary school students – teachers will know best if their students are ready for these. One effective exercise is to have students work in teams to role-play scenarios for each type of empathic miss and then practice responding to the same situation with empathy. This exercise helps students differentiate what empathy is and isn't. It is extremely powerful to see this in action because we've all been on both sides of the misses. A shorter version of this exercise is to read each of the empathy misses aloud and have students silently raise hands indicating the ones they can relate to. (Either they have done this themselves when trying to be empathic or they have been on the receiving end.)
 - Empathy Miss #1: Sympathy vs. Empathy
 - The friend who responds with sympathy (*"I feel so sorry for you"*) rather than empathy (*"I get it, I feel with you, and I've been there"*).
 - Empathy Miss #2: The Gasp and Awe
 - The friend who hears your story and feels shame on your behalf. They may gasp and tell you how horrified you should be (*"OMG, I can't believe you did that."*) When this happens we feel the need to make the other person feel better rather than asking for what we need, which is empathy.
 - Empathy Miss #3: The Mighty Fall

- The friend who sees you as perfect. They are so let down by your imperfections and disappointed in you (*“I just never expected that from you. I didn’t think you would ever be someone who didn’t do well. What happened?”*)
- Empathy Miss #4: The Block and Tackle
 - The friend who is so uncomfortable with vulnerability that they criticize you (*“What happened?! What were you thinking?”*).
- Empathy Miss #5: The Boots and Shovel
 - The friend who is all about making it better and, out of their own discomfort, refuses to acknowledge that you can actually make terrible choices (*“You’re exaggerating. It wasn’t that bad. You rock. You’re perfect. Everyone loves you”*). They are trying so hard to make you feel better that they’re unable to connect with your emotions.
- Empathy Miss #6: If You Think That’s Bad...
 - The friend who confuses “connection” with the opportunity to one-up you. (*“That’s nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!”*)
- Empathy Miss #7: I Can Fix That!
 - The friend who immediately jumps to problem-solving rather than just being with you in your experience. Most of us struggle with this one, especially if friends often come to us for help solving problems. One helpful empathic reply is to acknowledge the feelings and ask, “What does support look like?” This gives the person in struggle the opportunity to say, “Just listening helps” or “Can you help me figure this out?”
- Discussion Questions for either version of the empathy miss exercise:
 - When you were on the receiving end of an empathic miss, how did it feel?
 - When you have missed or messed up empathy with a friend, how did it feel? Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?

In addition to reading *Dare to Lead*, you can learn more here:

Books:

I Thought It Was Just Me

Daring Greatly

Videos ([brenebrown.com/dcvideos](https://www.brenebrown.com/dcvideos)):

RSA Short: Empathy

Learning Lab Videos ([brenebrown.com/dc-learning-labs](https://www.brenebrown.com/dc-learning-labs)):

What happens when empathy gets hard?

