



EMPATHY MISSES

1. I feel sorry for you.

SYMPATHY VERSUS EMPATHY

The person 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”). The subtext of this response is distance: These things don’t happen to me or people like me. If you want to see a shame cyclone turn deadly, throw one of these at it: “Oh, you poor thing” or “Bless your heart.”

2. You “should” feel shame!

JUDGMENT

The person who hears the story and actually feels shame for you. The friend gasps and confirms how horrified you should be. Then there is an awkward silence. Then you have to make this person feel better by convincing them that you’re not a terrible person.

3. You’ve let me down.

DISAPPOINTMENT

The person who needs you to be the pillar of worthiness and authenticity. This person can’t help you because they are too disappointed in your imperfections. You’ve let this person down.

4. This feels terrible. Who can we blame? You?

DISCHARGING DISCOMFORT WITH BLAME

Because shame is visceral and contagious, we can feel it for other people. This person immediately needs to discharge the discomfort and vulnerability of the situation by blaming and scolding. They may blame/scold you: “What were you thinking?” Or they may look for someone else to take the fall: “Who is that person? We’ll kick their butt.” Caution: Parents can fall easily into this when a child shares a shaming story with them. “How did you let this happen?”

5. Let’s make this go away.

MINIMIZE/AVOID

We minimize and avoid when we want hard feelings to go away. Out of their own discomfort, this person refuses to acknowledge that you’re in pain and/or that you’re hurting: “You’re exaggerating. It wasn’t that bad. You rock. You’re perfect. Everyone loves you.”

6. If you think that's bad!

COMPARING/COMPETING

This person confuses connecting with you over shared experiences with the opportunity to one-up you. “That’s nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!”

7. Don't upset people or make them uncomfortable.

COMPLIANCE VERSUS HARD CONVERSATIONS

This person thinks you should stay quiet and small rather than holding people accountable for language, comments, or behavior that marginalizes or dehumanizes others—especially if it creates discomfort or conflict: “I can’t believe you said that to your boss!” or “I can’t believe you went there!” or “You can’t talk about that stuff with people” versus an empathic response of “That must have been hard—you were really brave” or “It’s hard to stand up for what you believe in— thank you.”

8. I can fix this, and I can fix you

ADVICE GIVING/PROBLEM SOLVING

Sometimes when we see pain our first instinct is to fix it. This is especially true for those of us whom people seek out to help with problem-solving. In these instances, rather than listen and be with people in their emotion, we start fixing.

We have all experienced these empathic misses, AND we’re all capable of being “these friends”—especially if someone tells us a story that gets right up in our own shame grille. We’re human, imperfect, and vulnerable. It’s hard to practice empathy when we’re struggling with our authenticity or when our own worthiness is off -balance. That’s why we have to commit to practicing empathy, screwing it up, and circling back.