



**Becoming a Better Mentor:  
Strategies to Be There for Young People**



**MENTOR**

**CHAPTER 1**

# **PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND EMPATHY**

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### What Does Providing Emotional Support and Empathy Mean?

Empathy is a foundational human trait that makes being in meaningful connections with other people possible. There are many different definitions of empathy, but all are rooted in the common notion of “walking a mile in another’s shoes.” Empathy is being open to imagining another person’s experiences from their point of view and striving to find points of connection, not by presuming to feel the same but by trying to feel with, and be responsive to, the other person. It is an everyday but profound act of caring that can be all the more so when it requires finding connections where we thought we had none, as it allows us to see people for “who they are and help them realize their potential.”<sup>1</sup>

Some definitions of empathy emphasize its thinking aspects, whereas others focus more on the emotional side. However, most contemporary understandings of empathy, supported by neuroscience, recognize that it requires both thinking and feeling — trying to understand a person’s experience from their point of view and connecting with what they are feeling. But to go beyond feeling empathy to being empathic, you can’t stop there. You also have to be responsive to the person’s experience. One empathy researcher describes this as the “empathy loop” — perceiving what others are feeling, processing the information, and being responsive to the other person’s experiences.<sup>2</sup>

The benefits of being empathic in your mentoring relationship are great. Communicating that you care about and value your mentee and want to understand things from their point of view can result in them feeling emotionally supported by you. This can contribute to your mentee feeling heard,

understood, and responded to, and even respected by you. And respect is one of the most important features of effective adult-youth relationships from young people’s point of view.

In this chapter, I draw from the research on empathy in everyday life and almost two decades of interview-based research with mentors, youth, and youth’s families to show how empathy can be enacted in youth mentoring relationships. I break empathy down into two actionable components — perspective taking and adaptability — and discuss how mentors can use empathy to inform and enrich the emotional support they offer, which is one of the powerful means by which such relationships can contribute to mentees’ health and well-being. Developing your capacity for empathy can also boost your ability to effectively engage in other behaviors and practices that are important in positive mentoring relationships, especially attunement (see chapter 4 in this resource) and cultural humility (see chapter 2).

### Why Empathy Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Empathy matters because it makes meaningful connections between people possible and has been identified as a key agent in the promotion of effective working relationships. When someone is empathic with us, it allows us to feel comfortable and even safe enough to be open to accepting help from them. Studies looking at how mentoring relationships work suggest that mentors with more empathy are able to develop higher-quality relationships with their mentee. This is not surprising, as research on other helping or supportive relationships, such as those with doctors, social workers, and teachers, has emphasized the importance of empathy.<sup>3</sup> For example, patients treated with greater empathy and respect are more

<sup>1</sup>Riess, H., & Neporent, L. (2018). *The empathy effect: Seven neuroscience-based keys for transforming the way we live, love, work, and connect across differences*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True.

<sup>2</sup>Riess & Neporent, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Sulzer, S. H., Feinstein, N. W., & Wendland, C. L. (2016). Assessing empathy development in medical education: A systematic review. *Medical Education*, 50(3), 300–310.



likely to trust their doctors and have better health outcomes. And the helper benefits too, with reports of greater job satisfaction among helpers who increase their empathy through training.<sup>4</sup> Working to understand your mentee's experiences from their point of view can make the support you offer more likely to be welcomed and experienced as meaningful and impactful.

Although most people are born with the capacity for empathy, some of us are more naturally empathic than others. The good news is that the capacity for empathy is a skill that can grow through learning and practice. There is now a good deal of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of empathy training, and studies show that even short-term trainings can have a relatively big impact.<sup>5</sup> Practicing and trying things out is especially important in developing these skills. Even though you may not have the chance to participate in a formal empathy training, there are some things you can do to strengthen these muscles. Below are some real-life examples of what empathy in youth mentoring relationships looks like followed by information about what you can do to be more empathic in your own relationship with your mentee.

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### What Does Empathy Look Like in Practice?

Empathy can be shown in the overall approach you take in the relationship and also in small everyday exchanges with your mentee. Being empathic with someone whose experiences may be quite different from our own requires more work, and this is very frequently true in mentoring; in many cases mentees and mentors have quite different experiences, whether due to differences in social class, racial or ethnic backgrounds, other aspects of their lives and communities, or even simply their age. But bridging differences also has great rewards in that it can help to break down stereotypes we may be carrying without even knowing it, and helps us to hold the other person in a favorable light (see chapter 2 for more information on bridging differences). Being empathic is easier when someone is similar to us — we can more readily imagine and understand what they might be experiencing. However, even when someone is very similar to us, it still requires balancing appreciating the feelings of others while also learning to manage our own feelings so that we can be helpful. Regardless of whether you are working to connect across similarities or differences, empathy can be distilled down to two main sets of processes: perspective-taking and adaptability.

**Perspective-Taking** – Perspective-taking in mentoring is the ability to step outside of your own experiences and attempt to take your mentee's, and sometimes even your mentee's family's, point of view. This has been referred to as “decentering,” as it requires setting aside one's own values, beliefs, and worldviews and centering the thoughts and experiences of the other person. To achieve this, one empathy researcher offers what she calls the ABC model: Acknowledge, Breathe, and be Curious.<sup>6</sup> We can make room for empathy by acknowledging our own responses to the other person and then

<sup>4</sup> Riess & Neporent, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Teding van Berkhout, E., & Malouff, J. M. (2016). The efficacy of empathy training: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 63(1), 32–41.

<sup>6</sup> Riess & Neporent, 2018.



breathing deeply to ground ourselves and not let our emotions overtake us. This helps make space for being curious about the other person's experience and trying to understand things from their point of view.

Perspective-taking involves actively working to understand and relate to your mentee's experiences and to use this knowledge to be more responsive to their needs in the relationship. Finding commonalities in your experiences can be a good place to start. One mentor I interviewed for my research did just that by focusing on the shared experience of being from families who immigrated to the United States. Another drew from the shared personality trait of being "kind of shy." This mentor connected that to his own experience of being someone who might be a little slower to get to know someone and so didn't expect getting to know his mentee to happen overnight. Working to see things from his mentee's point of view, he realized it might take a little while for his mentee to feel comfortable with him and made the decision to be patient and wait. When communicating and interacting with a mentee's family, being empathic with these family members is important as well. In addition to fostering a better relationship with them, doing so can also expand and deepen your understanding of your mentee's world.

**Adaptability** – Although perspective-taking is an important first step, it alone is not enough. To be empathic, you must also communicate or show this to the youth by being responsive to their experiences. At times, this may mean you need to adjust your approach — your attitude and/or your behavior. For many mentors, being empathic early on in their mentoring relationship requires them to let go of some initial expectations they may be bringing to the relationship about what mentoring

was going to be like and ideas about what a youth might want or need, in order to adapt to being in a relationship with their actual mentee. One mentor I interviewed summed it up beautifully when he said, "I might have some expectations, but I can't really say that it will happen like I want. So, I'm just waiting to see what's going to happen and kind of adapt to what I need to for [my mentee]." A poignant example of adapting by changing behavior in response to a mentee's experiences comes from an interview I did with a mentor many years ago. This mentor told me that in response to his having arrived a few minutes late to their meetings, his mentee shared that it made him start to "freak out" about whether or not the mentor was going to show up that day. The mentor was aware that his mentee's father had been emotionally abusive and unreliable and so not only told his mentee that he appreciated hearing this, but also showed his mentee that he understood by adjusting his behavior and making an intentional effort to be on time to their future meetings.

### Putting It All Together

Being empathic plays a strong role in a mentor's ability to offer support that is more likely to be both welcomed and meaningful to their mentees. This is important because social support is an important way that mentoring can promote positive youth outcomes. Better understanding who your mentee is and how they experience the world helps you discern which types of support are likely to be most relevant and to time your offers of support well. I interviewed a mentor who was exceptionally good at waiting out his mentee. I met him four years into their relationship, and he described how his mentee had only recently started to even mention his father in conversation. Early on, when they were looking at a photo album together, the mentor got the distinct





feeling that his mentee really did not want to talk about this father. Responding to this hesitation, the mentor backed off and waited until his mentee initiated talking about him. In another arena, the mentor coupled this strategy with gentle pushes. He was a graduate student and had initially hoped to spend some of their meetings studying with his mentee. His mentee, however, hated school and didn't even want to talk about it much less spend time studying together. Here again, the mentor decided to back off but also began to take a light-touch approach of regularly dropping into their conversations a simple question about how school was going. Over time, the mentee shifted from not even wanting to answer that question, to offering small tidbits of information, and finally, to actually studying with his mentor. The mentee ultimately found this to be quite helpful as the presence of his mentor kept him more focused and on task, which was a significant challenge for him when doing schoolwork on his own. These sessions also created opportunities for the mentor to offer some tips for organizing schoolwork that his mentee tried out and appreciated.

As this example shows, being empathic does not mean simply going with whatever you think your mentee wants. This mentor still encouraged, and at times even gently pushed, his mentee but did so with an awareness of how his mentee felt and in ways that accounted for and was responsive to this. Moving too fast would have shut his mentee down. Never pushing would not have resulted in the mentor being able to eventually offer his mentee meaningful support with his schoolwork. There are also times when clear instruction, direction, and even correction may be needed, as is the case in any relationship between an adult and a young person. The key here is to begin by being curious and learning about your mentee's experience and

then offer direction in a way that is responsive to that, which consequently comes from a place of compassion rather than judgment.

How can you tell when you're being empathic? It can be hard to know for sure. Part of the challenge is that the best measure of success is how our efforts are experienced by the receiver. Does your mentee feel like you know or "get" them?<sup>7</sup> Even if the answer to this question is a resounding "yes," your mentee may or may not communicate that to you. You can also ask yourself how well you think you know your mentee. Do you feel like you have a good sense of who they are, how they see themselves, and what their interests and goals are? How challenged by this do you feel? Are you aware of how some of your own ideas about what you might think your mentee "should" think, or do, or want may be different from what they actually think, or do, or want for themselves? Are you open to these differences, and do you shift some of your own ideas and expectations to more fully appreciate your mentee as they are? And how much do you draw from this knowledge and use it to shape how you engage in your relationship with your mentee?

### Contextual Considerations for Empathy

Being empathic is important to the success of all types of mentoring relationships, whether short or long term or more or less goal-directed, and with mentees of all ages. It will help you in your efforts to get to know your mentee and to gauge their openness and interest in different types of activities. Communicating to your mentee that you genuinely want to get to know who they are and what matters to them will help your mentee grow to feel more comfortable with you.

<sup>7</sup> Ben-Eliah, A., Yoviene Sykes, L. A., & Rhodes, J. E. (2021). Someone who 'gets' me: adolescents' perceptions of positive regard from natural mentors. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 29(3), 305–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2021.1927438>



Empathy is also important at any stage of the mentoring process, as it helps you to shift and be responsive to your mentee's needs as they change. In the beginning of your relationship, you'll need to focus most intently on really listening for who your mentee is and what their experiences are. If you are observant and open, as your mentee grows to feel more comfortable with you, your knowledge of them can deepen over time as you really get to know them and observe changes in the kinds of support they may need and want. As was discussed in the introductory chapter in this resource, youth grow and change a lot through childhood. Being empathic will help you keep up with, and be responsive to, those changes that are a healthy part of youth development.

As mentioned earlier and is discussed in greater depth in chapter 7, empathy is also important in your relationship with your mentee's caregiver. Developing a better understanding of the family's experiences can help you have a more complete understanding of your mentee's world. It can also facilitate your support of your mentee's relationship with their parent(s). A critical part of one very successful mentoring relationship I encountered in my research was the mentor's ability to be a sounding board for her mentee when the mentee's mother remarried and formed a blended family. The mentee understandably had a range of emotions throughout this transition, including considerable anger toward her mother. The mentor would listen and allow the mentee to vent but would also remind the mentee that her mother loved her and had her own challenges to contend with. The mentor's empathic presence provided a safe space for the mentee to express her strong emotions while also helping to sustain the mentee's vitally important connection with her mother.

### Tips and Final Thoughts

Good intentions, although a start, are not enough to be successful at being empathic. In fact, in one study, my colleagues and I observed that although most mentors started their mentoring relationships planning or intending to see things from their mentee's point of view, not all were able to actually do so.<sup>8</sup> Mentors who were either more open-minded at the outset or more able to let go of their initial expectations and continually work to understand their mentee's experiences and expectations for the relationship tended to be better able to adapt and respond to their mentee's needs and build stronger connections, and often expressed more satisfaction with their relationship with their mentee. So, what gets in the way of being empathic, even when we intend or try to be? And what can we do instead? Below are some tips on "what not to do" in your efforts to become a more empathic mentor.

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**Assuming similar means the same** – One common pitfall is to assume that when you share similarities with another person, your experiences are the same. This can be especially tricky early in the relationship, before you know your mentee well and when your mentee might not be revealing much about themselves. While it is important to find places of connection to build your relationship, we have to be cautious not to overlay our experiences on to our

<sup>8</sup> Spencer, R., Pryce, J., Barry, J., Basualdo-Delmonico, A. & Walsh, J. (2020). Deconstructing empathy: A qualitative examination of mentor perspective- taking and adaptability in youth mentoring relationships. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 114, 105043.



mentees. Even when you notice similarities in your experiences and those of your mentee, don't assume they are the same. Instead, use your experiences to help you become more curious about your mentee. In what ways might there be some real similarities in your experiences and how might they be different? Consider what questions you might ask and what you can watch for to learn more about what your mentee's experiences are like.

**Thinking you “know best”** – Another trap that can be easy to fall into is to assume that you know what is best for your mentee. You may feel a strong urge to tell your mentee what to do to “fix” their problems — what is sometimes referred to as the “righting reflex” (discussed more in chapter 11). This can lead to a lot of tension in the mentoring relationship as mentors begin to push their own agenda on the mentee and then become frustrated when the mentee is not interested. It's better to listen for and learn about what the mentee is interested in and to join the mentee in working toward their own goals (see chapter 10 on goal setting and support). Also important are the mentee's parent(s)/caregiver(s) goals for the relationship. I have interviewed a number of parents who expressed frustration with mentors who seemed more focused on “fixing” than being with their child. This is not to say that as a mentor you can never offer ideas about things you think might be helpful to your mentee. Access to new ideas and opportunities can be part of what makes a mentoring relationship valuable for a young person's development and is a common reason why parents sign their children up for these programs. The difference lies in forcing one's own agenda because you feel you know what is “right” or “best” versus listening and learning and then perhaps introducing some new possibilities for your mentee to consider and gauging their response and receptivity.

**Drowning in emotions** – An important part of being empathic is keeping one's own emotional responses in check. Although being open to feeling what your mentee is feeling can be an important part of empathy, letting your mentee's experiences overwhelm you or dwelling on the negative can lead to what is called “compassion fatigue,” something nurses, social workers, and teachers are at risk for developing. It's hard to be open to more fully understanding someone else's experiences if you are too consumed by your own emotional reaction. Many young people who seek a mentor are navigating very challenging and complex circumstances in their lives and may be impacted by poverty, poorly resourced schools, inadequate health and mental health care, and multiple forms of discrimination. It can be emotionally draining to feel the weight of these forces in your mentee's life, especially for mentors who have no previous experience being in a relationship with people navigating these kinds of challenges. You can't wave a magic wand and make these things go away, so it's important to focus on what you can do, like being a positive and supportive presence, being reliable and consistent, and doing what you say you will do.

**Blaming the parent(s)/family** – It's important to keep in mind how some of these challenges may also impact your mentee's entire family, especially when their circumstances differ dramatically from your own. Not appreciating the obstacles the youth's family might be facing can make it all too easy to place blame for the youth's challenges on their parent(s) who may miss calls, forget meetings, or simply prioritize things differently than you imagine you would if you were in those same circumstances. Extending your efforts at empathy to your mentee's family by striving to see things from their perspective, rather than focusing on your



own, can help you to be more open to seeing and understanding the family's challenges as well as their strengths and resilience in the face of these challenges.

**Expecting to be “perfectly” empathic** – We all make mistakes and have moments in our relationships when we are not very empathic. Being perfectly empathic is not the goal — striving to be empathic and working to repair things when you have failed is what matters most. Simple acts can go a long way. Acknowledge when it feels like you have missed the mark with your mentee and let them know you'd like to try again. Be curious about your mentee and their experiences and show them through your body language, tone of voice, responses, and actions that you are listening and paying attention. Show openness, interest, and respect in how you engage with them. Also pay attention to what your mentee communicates to you. Observe their facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and emotions to learn more about them.

Finally, build your empathic capacity in areas that directly impact your mentee. If your mentee's life experiences are quite different from your own, do things to help you better understand their world. Reading books (fiction, memoirs, nonfiction — I've listed a few of my favorites in the Additional Reading and Resources section) can be informative and offer insights, as can watching movies and television programs or listening to podcasts on topics that are connected to your mentee's experience. Visiting places like the ones your mentee and their family go to can help you explore and experience a little of their world firsthand and may also increase your feeling of comfort in these spaces. You can also ask questions and let your mentee be the expert and teach you; but do this

sparingly so as not to make them feel like it is their responsibility to be your only teacher. Most of all, be open to learning and deepening your understanding of your mentee and of yourself. You will not only become a more effective mentor, but you will also be contributing to building a more humane and connected world.







## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

### Learn More about the Science and Practice of Empathy

- ***The Empathy Effect: Seven neuroscience-based keys for transforming the way we live, love, work, and connect across differences***  
(2018) by Helen Riess, MD with Liz Neporent – A highly readable book that provides an overview of the research on empathy and the principles Dr. Riess teaches in her empathy training.
- ***The Power of Empathy***  
TEDx talk by Helen Riess – A review of the main ideas Dr. Riess offers in her book, here in an engaging 20-minute talk. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***How to Be more Empathic***  
This article provides a bunch of tips on everyday things you can do to develop your capacity for empathy. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Why You Should Train for Empathy and How to Do It***  
An article to read for a few more tips on how to be more empathic. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Fixing the empathy shortage***  
A brief TEDx talk that describes the decline of our collective empathy and makes the case that empathy is a skill rather than a trait and how practice can help us become more empathic, individually and collectively. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***How to Actively Listen to Others***  
Another highly engaging 15-minute TEDx talk that demonstrates how to use the guidelines of improvisational comedy to hone your ability to more fully listen and respond to others. Click [here](#) to access.

### Memoirs and Novels

- ***Say I'm Dead: A Family Memoir of Race, Secrets, and Love***  
(2020) by Delores Johnson – In this memoir, the author explores her family history that revolves around multiple generations of interracial relationships. The reader is given a front-row seat to the personal costs associated with the ugliness and violence of racism as well as the power of truth and love.
- ***Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey from Homeless to Harvard***  
(2011) by Liz Murray – Murray draws on journals she kept throughout her childhood to offer a vivid account of growing up in a family living in poverty and ravaged by addiction. This is no simple “rags to riches” fairy tale. Rather, Murray invites us to experience the complexities of her childhood from her vantage point and shows us how compassion and love can bloom in even the starkest circumstances.
- ***The Language of Flowers***  
(2012) by Vanessa Diffenbaugh – This novel takes the reader into the mind and heart of a person who had to endure abandonment and being in the foster-care system. It offers a portrait of the toll that betrayal and trauma take on the human psyche, the longing for love and connection that never dies, and the courage needed to take a risk again.