

How to Fight Stress with Empathy

Psychologist Arthur Ciaramicoli argues that empathic listening may be the key to reducing stress in our lives. (abridged)

Leading with empathy can help those around us to be sources of support in our lives and reduce the likelihood of interpersonal conflicts.

Why use empathy? Because when we give and receive empathy we produce the near magical neurotransmitter oxytocin, which creates a sense of trust and cooperation—keys to negotiating and resolving conflict, whether between couples, communities, states, or countries. Leading with empathy can help those around us to be sources of support in our lives and reduce the likelihood of interpersonal conflicts.

Of course, it may be difficult to imagine feeling empathic when we are angry or tired. Think of a couple reuniting after a long day of work. Without first connecting through empathy and love, they may end up fighting over whose turn it is to do the dishes or simply withdrawing from each other, depriving themselves of the comfort that closeness brings.

Empathy Practice: Listening

How to avoid this? By practicing empathic listening with one another instead of falling on our usual patterns.

Too many of us listen to each other with half an ear, preoccupied and not fully present. We tend to listen with bias, making up our minds before we hear the full story, or to connect everything the other person says to our own experience without considering their perspective. We then make well-meaning comments that do not honor the uniqueness of the other's person's thoughts or feelings, such as, "I know what you're going through." Or, we get distracted by the noise of our internal voices and end up judging or second-guessing one another, which keeps us from really listening. Without truly listening, we run the risk of losing connection and making false assumptions.

What does empathic listening look like? It requires giving up a self-centered view of the world, focusing and paying attention, and setting aside biases or distorted thinking to connect with another person's emotions. It means coming to your interactions with a true desire for connection and understanding, rather than winning.

Empathy is easier when we understand some of the stories we carry inside about who we are and learn to see how it clouds our reactions and judgments. If we have been humiliated in childhood or starved of attention, we may have trouble trusting others or feeling comfortable with intimacy. Couples who fight a lot often carry stories like these about themselves—perhaps feeling unworthy because of past hurts—that make it hard for them to be present and more vulnerable to their partners.

But, when people learn to respond with empathic listening, it can help them to shift from their stories and distorted ways of thinking. They become less likely to take something done or said personally, assume that other people hold similar attitudes to one's own, or focus only on the negative instead of the positive in a situation.

7 Ways to Increase Your Empathic Listening Skills

Here are some of the recommendations I make to help people enhance their empathic listening and their ability to express empathy:

- **Reflect what others say to you** by either repeating or rephrasing what someone has said. *It sounds like you had a lot going on today at work, right?*
- **Emphasize the feeling behind the words** and check on the accuracy of your interpretation. *You sound exhausted. Is there something affecting you at work?*
- **Pay attention to body language.** *You look tense. What can I do to help?*
- **Ask open-ended questions**, to show you are interested in their perspective. *How was your day at the office? Not, Why are you so late?*
- **Slow down and take a deep breath to calm yourself** if you are feeling your buttons being pushed or if you are absorbing someone else's tension. Slowing down your emotional reactions can be helpful for truly tuning in to another person and not being tripped up by your own reactivity. Some people have found that mindfulness meditation, self-compassion, or compassion training can help with this kind of emotional regulation.
- **Avoid snap judgments.** Empathy means seeing human beings as always changing and evolving; so you don't want to judge and shut the person down.
- **Learn from the past.** If you are unaware of your own biases and often jump to conclusions, you will have trouble truly listening to another person and perceiving them accurately. Know your personal biases and use cognitive reframing—a technique that involves reconsidering your interpretations of events, something I describe in detail in my book—to help you reevaluate what's actually happening in a given conflict or situation versus what you're telling yourself at the time. By engaging your brain in this way, you can rewire it to be less emotionally triggered and to calm your nervous system.

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Learning to communicate with empathy can go a long way toward building more positivity in your relationships and reducing your stress. If we all focused more on listening and understanding each other, the world would be a lot less stressful—and a lot happier—place to live.