



PARTICIPATION AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE – COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND EMPATHY

SHORT EXERCISES FOR UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY

Empathy is about using the available evidence and one’s own imagination to put oneself in the place of another individual or group. Through empathy each person can have a positive influence on how any conflict is understood and solved. Empathy involves opening one’s heart and mind to others, to understanding the world through another’s eyes. An empathetic outlook can help each person to behave in ways that promote constructive and peaceful problem-solving, in all sorts of situations.

WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- Time: 15 minutes, plus time for discussion at the end
- The teacher asks students to complete statements related to success and failure at achieving goals
- The closing discussion could concentrate on the important of recognizing the role of emotions in conflict resolution

THE GOAL OF THE EXERCISE


The aim of the following exercise is to help the students understand the nature and importance of empathy. The exercise could be done as an informal discussion between the whole class. Or, if the students are brave enough to be very open, it could be done by asking them to write down their thoughts and experiences.

If choosing the latter option, it’s a good idea for the teacher to consider whether the students should do the exercise in groups of two or three, or if each student should work independently. Alternatively, the students could make some notes first and then use these to support discussion within their own group, or in pairs. To conclude, the students could share their thoughts on the exercise in a discussion among the whole class.

HOW THE EXERCISE SHOULD PROCEED

The teacher could begin the exercise by talking to the class about how it feels when a person achieves some goal or other; for example, would he or she feel relieved, happy, safe, satisfied, interested, etc.

Exercise: I got what I wanted. Here the students complete the statement: “When _____ happened or when I finally got _____, I felt”.



For example: “On my 12th birthday I got the new bike I’d been wanting for ages, and I was so happy”, or “When we finally went on holiday together, I felt excited”, etc.

The next exercise is about what a person might feel like if some hoped-for situation doesn’t come about; for example, he or she could feel disappointed, hurt, belittled, heartbroken, discouraged, pessimistic, etc.

Exercise: I didn’t get what I wanted. Here the students complete the statement: “When _____ didn’t happen or when I didn’t get _____, I felt”.

For example: “When I didn’t get a role in the school play, I felt sad”, or “When nobody would listen to what I had to say, I felt angry and frustrated,” etc.

Then the teacher might talk with the class about how one might feel when an argument or disagreement has been solved in a way that’s acceptable to all involved. What compromises were involved, and who had to compromise on what? What made these compromises acceptable? How did you feel once the conflict had been solved in this way (proud, relieved, optimistic, trustful, etc.)?

Exercise: We managed to agree. Ask the students to complete the statement: “When _____ and I had a disagreement about _____, we managed to sort it out (or reach a compromise). Once we had done so, I felt”.

For example: “When those of us in the Student’s Union had a disagreement about how the grant the union received should be used, we decided to make a shortlist of proposals and then to vote on these. So rather than buying new sofas or new bike stands, the majority voted to buy new speakers for the concert hall. Then everyone was happy.”

This exercise could be expanded by getting the students to discuss or make an admission about a physical response they had to some disagreement and to how it was solved. Here are some examples to help the students get started with this:

- When some hoped-for situation comes about, people can feel it physically. Their body might become more relaxed, they might feel “like a weight has been lifted from their shoulders”, they might smile or laugh, they might become more affectionate, etc.
- When some hoped-for situation doesn’t work out, this too can be experienced physically. The person might feel tense all over, or might frown or even cry, their breathing may become forced, etc.
- When two or more people succeed in achieving a common goal, they might feel more relaxed, “lighter”, more energetic, etc.



THINGS TO DISCUSS AFTER THE EXERCISE

In what ways do this knowledge and these experiences matter to conflict resolution? Think about some ongoing conflict (that's been in the news, for instance). Try to be empathetic to some particular person or group involved in that conflict. What thoughts, feelings, and needs do you think they might be having?

Additional questions for the students:

- What is your reaction to the following statement: "It's all or nothing – nothing is agreed upon until everything is agreed upon."
- Ask each student to explain how he or she felt in the short exercise they just did. If they can find some fault with their own response to the situation, encourage them to think of how they might have been able to respond to the situation (e.g. to the disappointment of not getting a hoped-for role in a school play) more constructively.
- Ask the students to try to think actions or thoughts that might make it more likely that two or more people keep their promises to each other in a specific situation. For example, a conflict is more likely to be solved in a fair and lasting way if all those who are affected by the conflict are given a fair say in solving the problem. Also, a conflict is more likely to be solved in a fair and lasting way if all those affected by it can agree on the sort of solution that would be acceptable to all of them. (This may be a solution that's not perfect for anybody; most achievable solutions to complicated problems involve some amount of compromise by those involved).