

EXERCISE:

Practicing Empathy

When we're looking for connection and empathy, we need to share with someone who embraces us for our strengths and struggles – someone who has earned the right to hear our story.

But finding that someone takes practice. When it comes to empathy, it's often about connecting with the *right person* at the *right time* about the *right issue*.

Read the following scenarios describing various types of empathic misses. Ask yourself when and with whom you're more likely to experience this, AND when and with whom you are more likely to respond to someone else's struggle like this.

1) Indicating that shame is warranted: The friend 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.

2) Sympathy: 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"). If you want to see a shame cyclone turn deadly, throw one of these at it: "Oh, you poor thing."

3) Disappointment: The friend who needs you to be the pillar of worthiness and authenticity. This person can't help you because she or he is too disappointed in your imperfections. You've let this person down.

4) Judgment or righteous anger: The friend who is so uncomfortable with vulnerability that she or he scolds you: "How did you let this happen? What were you thinking?" Or the friend looks for someone to blame: "Who was that guy? We'll kick his butt."

5) Minimizing: The friend who is all about making it better and, out of his or her own discomfort, refuses to acknowledge that you can actually be crazy and make terrible choices: "You're exaggerating. It wasn't that bad. You rock. You're perfect. Everyone loves you."

6) Comparing or competing: The friend who confuses "connection" with the opportunity to one-up you. "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!"

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1. **As you reflect on the list, how does it feel for you to be on the receiving end of an empathic miss?** *Are there one or two that really lead you to shut down? What emotion comes up for you when your sharing is met with one of these? How does it affect your connection with this person?*

2. **Looking at the list, are there one or two responses that you sometimes use and that you'd like to change? Which ones?**

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 grill.

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.

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