Empathy is the Key to Understanding Others

Empathy is the ability to step into the shoes of another person, aiming to understand their feelings and perspectives and to use that understanding to guide our actions. That makes it different from kindness or pity. And don’t confuse it with the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” As George Bernard Shaw pointed out, “Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you—they might have different tastes.” Empathy is about discovering those tastes.

How do you increase the skill of empathy? It can be learned! Here are four ways:

Get curious!

Highly empathetic people have an insatiable curiosity about the people around them. They find others more interesting than themselves. They are the ones who will strike up a conversation with their mail lady, showing genuine interest in her life, but not in an interrogating type of way. Curiosity expands empathy when we talk to people outside our social circle.

What would it feel like to be the only single woman on your cul-de-sac? What would it feel like to be a Catholic woman living in Provo? If you live in a predominantly LDS area try attending the church service of another religion. Imagine what her life is like and ask her with a genuine interest to learn.

Challenge prejudices

We all use labels, “non-member”, “less active”, “working mom”, etc. Empathetic people challenge their own preconceptions of others and search for what they have in common with rather than what is different. Challenge the assumption that your neighbor doesn’t attend church because she is lazy. Maybe she suffers with anxiety, has poor health, or is struggling with her faith and feels unwelcome because she doesn’t “know”.

Listen well and Open Up

Highly-empathetic people have really mastered the art of being a good listener. They listen well to others and do all they can to grasp their emotional state and needs, whether it is a friend who just found out her husband has a pornography problem or her neighbor who doesn’t feel included in the neighborhood play groups. Use words that tell your friend you really do want to understand her: “That’s interesting, I never thought of it that way, please help me understand” or “Tell me more.”

Listening isn’t enough though, be vulnerable and share as well. Removing our own mask and sharing our joyful but also painful life experiences is essential for creating an emotional bond as well. Empathy is a two-way street.

Inspire action

We often assume empathy only happens with individuals but it can also happen in our wards and congregations. Be courageous in comments, talks, and lessons at church in sharing what you have learned about including others and about empathy. Children are great at inclusiveness but so are adults! We are all here to change and improve. Be the force in your own ward and neighborhood that inspires others to change as well. Model it, live it, talk about. It only takes a small amount of courage.

Sources:

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